Re-visioning one's selves: mirror reflections in the autobiographical works of Marguerite Duras

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Abstract

This thesis explores the construction of the central figure of a cycle of four works relating to Marguerite Duras' adolescence in Indochina: *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique, L'Éden Cinéma, L'Amant,* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord.* In these texts, biographical fact – the conventional foundation of autobiographical writing – is shown to be mutable, as Duras (re)creates and re-visions the past and self in question. The plurality of Duras' textual history suggests that the central figure's construction does not lie, as we might have anticipated, in a performative reading of her past. A new and alternative explanation for the central figure's construction is proposed: namely, that she is described by a series of mirror reflections within, between, and beyond the texts.

The thesis is divided into four sections. Chapter I draws upon psychoanalytical and feminist theories to introduce the notion of mirror reflections in intra- and extra-textual contexts, with particular reference to interpersonal relationships, textual devices and reader involvement. Chapter II examines the deliberate alteration of the central figure's image and reflection, discussing questions of power, performance, and (self-) objectification. Chapter III focuses on the interaction between writing and written selves, on the re-visioning of self and history, and questions the 'autobiographical' status of these texts. Chapter IV suggests that the four accounts act as intertextual mirrors, forming contradictory reflections that profoundly shape the reading experience by destabilising any previously confirmed sense of the textualised selfhood. The iterative (dis)establishment of the written self is also explored in relation to Duras' perception of writing as a process that is concurrently creative, destructive and chaotic. It is concluded that the mirror trope is indeed useful in describing the construction of the central figure of these texts, yet it brings the reader no closer to locating the central self and her past in a form that is neither plural nor provisional.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations will be used in this thesis to refer to the works of Marguerite Duras:

LA	*L'Amant* (Paris: Minuit, 1984)
ACN	*L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991)
BCP	*Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950)
CG	*Cahiers de la Guerre et autres textes* (Paris: P.O.L./IMEC, 2006)
EC	*L'Éden Cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard/Mercure de France, 1986)
ECR	*Écrire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993)
VM	*La Vie Matérielle* (Paris: Gallimard/P.O.L., 1993)

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The story of Duras' past is revisited numerous times in narrative works, plays, interviews and film. The most well-known accounts, and those which we will explore in this study, are situated in a cycle of four works relating to Duras' adolescence in Indochina: *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950), *L'Éden Cinéma* (1977), *L'Amant* (1985), and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991). We might expect that each return to the autobiographical story would consolidate our previously acquired knowledge of the textualised self and her story. Yet it paradoxically seems that each increase in textual material blurs the definition of the central figure, as the often contradictory nature of Duras' accounts undermines previously established 'facts' of the textualised past. The resulting mutability of the underlying story challenges our understanding of how the self textualised in autobiography is produced, for it is apparent that the author does not employ history - basic biographical fact - to define this self. In this thesis, we will propose an alternative explanation for the construction of the central self of these 'autobiographical' works. We will also examine how Duras' use of style and content tests the boundaries of conventional autobiography, and so explore alternative ways to describe these texts according to a variety of theories of 'writing the self'.

Many previous examinations of the techniques which Duras uses to create her textualised self suggest that an interplay between various intra-textual and extra-textual agents is instrumental. For instance, in *Duras, Writing, and the Ethical*, Martin Crowley alludes to a schism between authorial and textualised

selves: "The writing of autobiography inevitably splits the self it presents: between the writing self and the self written" (Crowley, 2000, 257). A space is thus created where self may be seen as other, and we may suggest that within this space the textualised self may be re-visioned by the authorial self, and vice versa, thus creating an interactive relationship. Laurie Corbin's *The Mother Mirror: Self-Representation and the Mother-Daughter Relation in Colette, Simone de Beauvoir and Marguerite Duras* (1996) also focuses upon the distinction between self and other as a source of textual self-production. However, she uses a psychoanalytical understanding of the self-other relationship to propose that relationships between characters can be used to give a reflected illusion of a coherent central selfhood. Similarly, in *Autobiographical Tightropes,* Leah Hewitt proposes that the self is created in relation to other, incorporating a division between acting and narrating textualised selves: "Duras continually makes us aware that a point of view is always relative to others and is itself split and mobile [...]. *The Lover* poses the question of [...] subjectivity via the interaction between the narrating 'I' as storyteller, and the 'she' the narrator remembers having been" (Hewitt, 1990, 98). Finally, in the article 'La destruction de la réalité', Gisèle Bremondy suggests that the interplay between the reader and the textualised self also plays an important role in allowing us to envisage the central selfhood as unified and coherent, for an engaged involvement with the text will allow us to situate ourselves within the realm of the writing and acting self: "[l]'auteur nous fait entrer dans sa propre réalité et dans le « je(u) » de l'autobiographie" (Bremondy, 1985, 55).

The areas of dynamic interaction described above are highly suggestive of the psychoanalytic concept of the mirror, as noted above by Laurie Corbin (1996,

95) and Victoria Best (1999, 162). Lacan's explanation of the first mirror experience, that is to say the *stade du miroir*, is that an infant assumes their selfhood by first recognising a seemingly coherent physical self-image in the 'mirror' provided by an other. This enables the infant to realise their physical and psychological independence from the surrounding environment. Whilst this seems to result in a sense of an autonomous selfhood, the 'self' is always in some way 'other':

> Viewing the image involves a fundamental misrecognition on the part of the infant who is not coherent and unified, but actually constituted by the displeasing fragmentation and dissipation s/he seeks to escape. Furthermore, having assimilated the structure of the mirror image as a basis for subjectivity, the infant will now continue to seek self-recognition and self-knowledge in external images, thus incorporating a fundamental alienation into its ego formation" (Best/Collins, 1999, 12).

The continued interplay between self and other that results is described by Julia Kristeva as a "jeu de miroirs sans perspective, sans durée" (Kristeva, 1987, 253). Indeed, this mirror relationship must be maintained in order to maintain the image of a stable and coherent selfhood.

It therefore seems viable to argue that mirroring can account for the construction of the central selfhood. Indeed, the mirror relationship offers a mode of self-construction that is not reliant upon a coherent textual history as a means of self-definition. Mirror relationships between the central self, characters, the reader, and the author can be used to delineate the central self

in the absence of clear biographical information. However, the mutability of Duras' textualised past may still affect the reflected self. The shifting nature of textual (hi)story means that mirrors, like the past, may also alter in form and content, and therefore influence and undermine self-construction. As a result, an investigation of the effects of authorial re-visioning of the past and of her textualised counterpart will also prove important to an understanding of the construction of the mirrored self.

In Chapter I, we will use the psychoanalytical understanding of the mirror relationship to explore how the interaction between characters produces a sense of the protagonist's selfhood. We will also examine how various textual devices are used to provide reflections that support those offered by intersubjective mirrors. The role of the reader as extra-textual mirror will also be introduced. Chapter II will examine how the mirror relationship can be manipulated by the central self and by secondary characters, as image and behaviour can be deliberately altered by self or other. This will include an examination of the reasons why characters may want to subvert the mirror relationship, and the potential problems that manipulation may cause for characters and the reader. In Chapter III, we will begin to focus upon authorial re-visioning of the central figure and her past. In particular, we will explore how re-visioning challenges conventional expectations of writing the self, whilst allowing the author to express the characteristics of the mirror relationship. At this point, we will also see why the term 'autobiography' is potentially problematic when applied to these texts, and consider other ways in which we might describe these works, including theories of autofiction and autoportrait. We will then continue in Chapter IV with an exploration of intertextual mirrors, created as a result of textual re-visioning. We will

examine the potentially disruptive role of these mirrors, and evaluate the consequences of authorial re-visioning of the central figure on the reading self's experience of these texts.

I

Mirror Images

In this chapter, we will examine a number of sources of reflection in order to demonstrate the mirrored construction of the central figure's selfhood. Firstly, it will be argued that the central character is reflected by secondary characters, in a network of intersubjective mirror relationships. As we will see, the resulting reflections generate a composite, shifting illusion of the protagonist's selfhood. Secondly, we will explore the use of 'static' mirrors. These mirrors, which consist of textualised examples of what might be termed 'primary evidence' – 'original' documents and media such as photographs, film, and letters which are then incorporated into the narrative – are interesting in that they begin to open up the question of autobiographical truth. Finally, we will turn our attention to the use of the reader as an extra-textual mirror. It will be shown that the reader is also used as an intra-textual, intersubjective mirror, for we are drawn into the textual realm in order to provide an additional source of reflection.

Intersubjective mirrors: self and other, self as other

It is evident even from the opening line of the first of these 'autobiographical' texts – *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* - "Il *leur* avait semblé *à tous les trois* que c'était une bonne idée d'acheter ce cheval" (BCP 11, emphasis added), that the central figure of these works exists very much in the context of secondary characters. In this section, it will be proposed that interactions between the

central figure and secondary characters work as intersubjective mirror relationships, forming reflections which combine to produce the illusion of a coherent selfhood. We will therefore examine how characters form a "hall of mirrors" (Best, 1999, 162) around the central character, and how the production of 'self' by the 'other' can be problematic.

The intersubjective mirror, as understood here, and the ensuing selfhood which it produces, can be closely linked to the conventional psychoanalytic concept of the mirror. According to psychoanalytic theory, the mother provides a mirror in which the infant first acquires a sense of a coherent physical self[1]. The infant begins to identify self as distinct to all that is other in her surrounding environment, and this 'otherness' is confirmed by the entry into language, as the child can then label that which is other. In this way, the child assumes his own subjectivity (see Lacan, 1966, 93-100). Beyond the *stade du miroir,* interactions with the other continue to provide reflections necessary for the maintenance of a stable sense of self. The 'self' therefore always exists as 'self and other'.

Due to the mother's role in the creation of her daughter's initial sense of self, her involvement is perhaps more invested and complex than that of other mirrors. Indeed, her contribution to the child's sense of self can never be fully erased. This influence on both initial and later selfhoods affects the child's ability to see herself and others, for the child's absorption of the (m)other as self means that her 'vision' is, in a sense, necessarily mediated through the mother's consciousness. This enmeshing of the mother's reflection and of the

[1] Whilst Lacan describes this mirror as primarily visual in nature, Dolto emphasises that it is composed of all of the senses. For further discussion, see Guillerault (2003).

daughter's selfhood traps both parties in a partially shared perspective. It is this constant and inescapable entanglement which forms the basis of the young protagonist's habitual referential frame. When this viewpoint is disturbed, and the interdependent nature of the protagonist's selfhood is revealed, her whole worldview alters. This consequence is evidenced particularly well in an episode from *L'Amant*, in which the mother, gazing out from the *terrasse* in a kind of daydream, suddenly appears to be substituted for an unknown woman:

> Il y a eu tout à coup, là, près de moi, une personne assise à la place de ma mère, elle n'était pas ma mère, elle avait son aspect, mais jamais elle n'avait été ma mère. [...] Il y avait en elle une jeunesse des traits, du regard, un bonheur qu'elle réprimait en raison d'une pudeur dont elle devait être coutumière. Elle était belle. [...] [J]e savais que personne d'autre n'était là à sa place qu'elle-même, mais que justement cette identité qui n'était remplaçable par aucune autre avait disparu et que j'étais sans aucun moyen de faire qu'elle revienne [...]. Rien ne se proposait plus pour habiter l'image. Je suis devenue folle en pleine raison. [...] J'ai crié. Un cri faible, un appel à l'aide pour que craque cette glace dans laquelle se figeait mortellement toute la scène. (LA 105-106)

This disquieting alteration in the central character's view of her mother arises as a result of two factors. Firstly, the mother's attention is not focused in any way upon her daughter. As a result, the protagonist is freely able to look upon her mother without the risk of challenge from the mother's gaze. This affords the protagonist an unusual and unexpected moment of power.

Second, the image projected by the mother cannot be easily interpreted by the protagonist, for her mother's external image reveals nothing of the grounds for her uncustomary happiness. This is to say that the underlying reason for the mother's reaction cannot be 'read' from the surface image that she presents. These two extraordinary circumstances combine to produce an altered manner of seeing, and so the protagonist momentarily re-visions her mother, glimpsing her from an outsider's viewpoint. This re-visioning therefore causes the mother figure to become someone who is physically reminiscent of the protagonist's mother "elle avait son aspect" (LA 105), but who is also a stranger located outside of the frame of the mother-daughter mirror relationship "jamais elle n'avait été ma mère" (LA 105).

It is important to emphasise that the protagonist's consequent reaction results not from the actual content of what she sees, but primarily from the manner in which she sees it. Her feeling of being "folle en pleine raison" (LA 105-106) is therefore primarily caused by her displacement from her habitual referential frame, and only secondarily by the resulting distortion of the mother figure's expected image. Positioning oneself outside of the mother-daughter mirror relationship, however temporarily, is thus shown to be as destabilising as standing within it. For without her habitual reflection from the mother mirror, the daughter's perception of her selfhood as a property which is both coherent and recognisable to herself is altered. Thus the true nature of her selfhood – that it is a property based in fragmentation and illusion – is revealed. Furthermore, the lack of reflection from her mother means that the protagonist perceives her selfhood as momentarily immobile, and one could argue that her sense of self risks being lost, if we consider that self is also other. The use of the qualifier "mortellement" (LA 106) therefore

seems highly apt, for reflections appear to be both a creative and destructive force in the formation of self-image. It seems, then, that the "glace" of the mirror is so powerful that an absence of a reflection can potentially turn one's inner self to ice, in a transformative effect reminiscent of the enchanted mirrors of countless fairytales. We might suggest that just as the protagonist's "cri faible" (LA 106) allows her to become active and so break this spell "Ma mère s'est retournée" (LA 106), re-writing the event is a further assertion that enables the protagonist to maintain control, as Sigmund Freud suggests of the young boy in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was [...], he took on an *active* part" (Freud, 1950, 15).

The inextricable bonds of the mother-daughter mirror relationship also impact upon its own textual formalisation. The authorial permutation of the central figure effectuates her mother's textual visibility, that is to say her textual existence, through writing; but the mother is the origin of the central figure's ability to write both parties into existence, and so remains constantly influential. It can therefore be argued that mother and daughter are each responsible for the textual existence of the other. The resulting power that this co-dependency bestows on the pair is readily evidenced. The central character's influence is necessarily demonstrated: in her role as author, she will ultimately control the textual representation of her mother, and of all other characters and events. The central figure's unique position both outside and within the texts allows both her present (writing) view and former view of her mother to be included within the narrative. Meanwhile, the mother is shown to control many of the basic 'facts' which form the basis of the autobiographical content. Indeed, her role within the textual realm is such

that she is depicted as a "monstre dévastateur" (BCP 171). Her influence extends beyond the family unit to the public sphere, and she even claims a god-like mastery over acts of nature:

> Ecoutez: les paysans de la plaine, eux aussi, elle les avait convaincus. Depuis des milliers d'années que les marées de juillet envahissaient la plaine...
> Non... disait-elle. Non... Les enfants morts de faim, les récoltes brûlées par le sel, non ça pouvait aussi ne pas durer toujours.
> Ils l'avaient crue. (EC 25)

This grandiose self-belief never fully corresponds to the reality of the mother's situation. Whilst she may be able to persuade the local people to help her to build the *barrage,* she cannot rule the tides. In the same way, she can influence, but is never able to execute full control over her textual existence. The depiction of the mother figure of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* as a "reine sans patrie" (ACN 122) is indeed apt, for the existence of both her "royaume" (ACN 15) and her self are reliant upon formalisation by the central figure. Accordingly, the mother must relinquish her own vision of her selfhood, which will then be re-visioned and rewritten as her daughter desires.

The unavoidable loss of control over the representation of her own selfhood perhaps explains the mother's dismissal of the daughter's desire to write as an "idée d'enfant" (LA 29). Such a comment, denying the power of both writing and the writer, might lead us to believe that the mother does not desire textual representation at the price of loss of control over her self-image. As we

have already explored, the mother gives the central figure her ability to 'see' and write, and so her refusal to participate could potentially be catastrophic for the 'autobiographical' project. However, there is also a less complex factor which may explain the necessity of the mother's collaboration. As we have established that the presence of the other is vital to the creation of a coherent selfhood, it seems plausible to argue that this tenet holds true for textual representation. This would mean that the (m)other's textual presence is vital in producing and facilitating the textual expression of the central character's selfhood. Whilst this means that the protagonist may textually portray her mother against her will, the mother figure is not always without influence over what is portrayed and how events are presented. For instance, in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* the narrator expresses the sentiment that her mother's presence has meant that she could only approach, and not broach, certain subjects: "J'ai beaucoup écrit de ces gens de ma famille, mais tandis que je le faisais ils vivaient encore, la mère et les frères, et j'ai écrit autour d'eux, autour de ces choses sans aller jusqu'à elles" (LA 14).

On a superficial level, then, the mother-daughter relationship seems to be grounded in conflict, and as such, in difference. In *Intersexual Rivalry,* Julia Waters identifies several dissimilarities between mother and daughter, and proposes that these might be used to set up the mother as "a model of opposition in the construction of the autobiographical self" (Waters, 2000, 143). In other words, the opposing characteristics of the mother figure provide a foil that throws the central figure into relief. However, it is also very useful to examine the extensive network of similarities within the mother-daughter mirror relationship. These similarities can demonstrate the necessity of the mother figure's presence in the construction of the central

character's sense of self, and show the inescapability of their relationship. It could be argued that there are three main areas of resemblance between the mother and daughter. The first is similarity is in physical appearance. These similarities can assume the form of natural likenesses, such as in the case of inherited physical features – "C'est dans le sourire qu'il voit la ressemblance avec sa fille" (ACN 131) – or may be constructed: "Elle porte la même chemise en coton blanc que celle de sa mère, à bretelles rapportées, faite par Dô" (ACN 24). Secondly, mother and daughter demonstrate a similar manner of speaking. This is especially noticeable when they are describing one another. For instance, the mother's utterance "[u]ne saleté de fille comme j'ai là..." (BCP 125) strongly echoes the daughter's remark "la saleté, ma mère, mon amour" (LA 31). Finally, the resemblance extends to their psychological outlook. Most notably, they exhibit the same sense of fate, sharing in the mother's "spectacle [du] désespoir" (LA 70). This particular psychological resemblance is made visible in the photographs and descriptions of the protagonist and her mother in *L'Amant* (LA 57). It can also be observed that both characters demonstrate an acute awareness of political and social inequality, as exemplified by the scathing reactions of both mother and daughter to the injustices of the colonial regime (BCP 269-279; EC 127-133).

The notion that neither mother nor daughter has an independent existence is further reinforced by their relative anonymity. Neither is named in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* and this lack means that mother and daughter are apparently lost in language. Devoid of names to signify their existence as separate entities, their reliance upon one another for textual representation is heightened. This degree of interdependence can be contrasted to the situation in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma,*

where the protagonist is named as 'Suzanne'. In these texts, the emphasis is very much upon familial relationships, but naming allows the narrator to pursue a source of self-definition that is less reliant upon other family members, and in particular, upon the mother-daughter mirror relationship. The resulting distance will play an important role in the protagonist's attempts to "se libérer de la mère" (BCP 171). It is potentially significant, however, that the name given to the protagonist does not correspond to that of the autobiographical, extra-textual referent. The name 'Suzanne' can perhaps be read as a denial of the true name given by the mother, thus slightly undermining the contribution that the mother mirror makes to the daughter's selfhood. The use of a false name also emphasises the malleable nature of autobiographical truth and fiction in these texts, by highlighting that these works constitute textualised accounts of reality, and not reality itself. This discrepancy between referential truth and textual fiction, and its impact upon our reading of the texts, will be further explored in Chapters III and IV.

In order to escape the trap of the mother-daughter mirror, and to find a more stable self-image, the central character also seeks reflection in mirrors provided by other characters. The principal source of reflection within the family is afforded by the brother figure. Yet this mirror proves to be problematic on a most basic level, as its very form is shown to be unreliable. For instance, in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma*, the brother is represented as a single figure, an adored but malevolent character. Then, in *L'Amant and L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the brother role is shared by two figures. The elder brother is represented much in the same way as the sole brother figure of the previous texts, but his character is this time contrasted

with that of the timid and defenceless younger brother[2]. This does not prevent the protagonist from confusing (and indeed fusing) their existences, with consequences for their resulting textual representation(s): "Je parle souvent de mes frères comme d'un ensemble" (LA 71). The introduction of a second brother figure may seem problematic for the reader, as the 'truth' established in the earlier texts is seemingly negated. However, the use of a second mirror is in fact extremely useful, for it allows us to 'see' the protagonist from an additional angle.

Joseph, the brother figure of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma,* and the elder brother in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* has a highly influential role within the family unit. In the absence of a father figure, he seems to assume the position of the father in the protagonist's mind: the *nom du père* is replaced by the *nom du frère.* She idolises Joseph, modelling upon him her awaited fairytale 'knight' who will one day carry her away in his expensive car. She dreams, for instance, that this man will be "[l]'âge de Joseph. Chasseur" (EC 39). This motif of the mythical, desired *chasseur* figure is recurrent, particularly in the earlier texts, suggesting that this wish is truly embedded in the protagonist's mind. This subconscious ideal of finding a relationship with a man like her brother profoundly influences her reactions towards the lover figure. Her brother's influence is also felt on a more conscious level, principally occurring in three ways. The first of his attempts

[2] Hellerstein (1991) proposes that these characters, amongst others, play the role of textual doubles. She suggests that their personalities and fates provide warnings of the protagonist's own character 'flaws' and their potential consequences. Whilst the traits of other characters could potentially be interpreted in this way, this seems relatively unlikely, given that warnings cannot be of much use in texts where so much is presented as inevitable or 'too late'. Instead, I would argue that the personalities of other characters highlight various aspects of the protagonist's personality – as if acting as a mirror - by reflecting her traits in an exaggerated form.

at control, as we might anticipate, come in the form of verbal instructions: "Faudra que tu lui dises demain de ne plus jamais revenir" (BCP 134). Second, the brother's power means that he can control his sister's reaction to the lover simply with his presence: "La façon qu'a ce frère aîné de se taire et d'ignorer l'existence de mon amant procède d'une telle conviction qu'elle en est exemplaire. [...] Moi non plus, [...] je ne lui parle pas" (LA 65). Finally, Joseph's influence is such that the protagonist deliberately considers her brother's reaction before making decisions about her relationship with the lover character. The older brother's voice can even override that of the mother figure in her mind: "Jamais la mère n'accepterait. Et même si elle [la mère] acceptait, Joseph, lui, n'accepterait jamais" (BCP 112).

However, the "ordres muets" (LA 67) of the brother's gaze are perhaps even more influential. It is consistently evident that Joseph has fully and deliberately mastered the ability to manipulate actions and reactions using the gaze. He frequently refuses, for example, to engage visually with the lover figure, thus declining to provide a reflection to confirm the lover's selfhood. This refusal effectively constitutes a negation of the lover's presence, and overtly demonstrates Joseph's disapproval of his sister's relationship with this man. This particular use of the gaze thus demonstrates that withholding the gaze is as powerful as bestowing it, especially when the mirror in question is as influential as this one: "Nous prenons tous modèle sur le frère aîné face à cet amant" (LA 65). The brother is therefore effectively able to nullify the lover's existence by imposing a collective denial of the gaze, for in these texts, characters that are without a mirror find existence near impossible.

The sanction of Joseph's gaze is also crucial within the family unit. We might note that his gaze is often associated with physical power and dominance, and so proves instrumental in such episodes that when the mother beats her daughter (BCP 126-128). Joseph does not protest, but simply watches. This visual sanction suggests that he approves of (and perhaps enjoys) the physical spectacle resulting from conflict within the mother-daughter relationship. However, the protagonist refuses to let her older brother's behaviour tarnish the faultless image that she has of him. Instead, she constructs an illusory, alternative truth around the event, in a deliberate re-visioning of the situation: "Joseph restait parce qu'il ne voulait pas la laisser seule avec la mère dans cet état, c'était sûr. Peut-être même n'était-il pas tout à fait rassuré" (BCP 127). The element of conjecture here is suggestive both of the impossibility of knowing the other, and of the protagonist's attempt to maintain a stable internalised image of her brother. If the protagonist can convince herself that her perception of her brother is valid, then her own self-image can be maintained. Indeed, any alteration in the image she has of her older brother's selfhood would necessarily result in an alteration of her own self-view, thus destabilising her own sense of self. Furthermore, sustaining this idealised image of her older brother validates her belief that he will provide an escape route from the physical and psychological trap of her relationship with her mother: "C'est ensemble qu'on quitterait la mere. / Ensemble qu'on la laisserait, là. Dans cette plaine, seule avec sa folie" (EC 40). The use of the distorted image of the brother figure therefore allows the protagonist to maintain both current and future (perceived) selfhood.

The protagonist's attitude towards her older brother becomes increasingly ambivalent in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. This is emphasised in

two ways. Firstly, there is an evolution in narrative content, with Joseph transformed from an idolised figure into a "voyou" (LA 96). Secondly, the narrative stances held by the protagonist and her older brother also evolve. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, Joseph's power means that he is associated closely with the similarly powerful mother figure, whilst Suzanne, excluded, recounts the family's story. Then, in *L'Éden Cinéma*, Joseph and Suzanne are most closely grouped, sharing the narration of their mother's downfall almost equally. This manifests itself on a lexical level by distinct echoes between their phrases, such as the refrain of "[j]usqu'à sa mort" (EC 25) that is spoken by Suzanne and Joseph in turn, evoking a sense of equality and accord between the two characters. Later, in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the central figure returns to her original role of sole narrator, but does not return to her former role of excluded onlooker. This change could be attributed to the additional presence of the younger brother in these texts. As the younger brother, Paulo, becomes the focus of the protagonist's adoration, the older brother loses some of his former power. This means that the narrator is largely at liberty to depict her older brother as she wishes: "un voyou de famille, un fouilleur d'armoires, un assassin" (LA 96). Even by his 'own' admission, he has become the "malheur de ma famille" (ACN 159). Of course, such an admission could certainly be a fabrication on the part of the author-narrator, and this would further demonstrate the extent of her power as narrative formaliser: she is able to manipulate the acts and words of others. Additionally, the central figure's control over her brother's depicted self-image means that he can be repositioned within the narrative so as to carry less influence over the protagonist. Joseph's ability to manipulate the central character's relationship with the lover is accordingly decreased in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. Just as Joseph's absence in *Un Barrage contre*

le Pacifique allows Suzanne to wear the dress bought by M. Jo (BCP 300), his diminished textual influence here means that the texts can focus more sympathetically on the protagonist's relationship with the lover figure. This is not to say that the older brother's influence on the protagonist's subconscious mind is completely erased. The lover figure, for instance, whilst not the imagined *chasseur*, is still thought of in the context of the older brother. For just as Joseph is a "voyou" (LA 96), the lover is "une sorte de voyou millionnaire" (ACN 95).

The weak and powerless younger brother, Paulo, ostensibly stands in opposition to the older brother. Although his biographical counterpart is in fact older than the central character (Adler, 1998, 33), he is represented as being younger than the protagonist. This positioning can perhaps be explained by his lack of influence within the texts. His situation as younger brother is useful, as it conveniently places the central figure between two mirrors of entirely different temperament[3]. However, the controlling personality of the elder brother means that it is relatively difficult to glean information about the younger brother's role as a mirror. Paulo is so afraid of his brother that he is literally silenced in his brother's presence. As a result, the reflections of the protagonist which he offers take a predominantly physical and visual form. The younger brother therefore provides the protagonist with a reflection of her corporeal identity: "le corps de mon petit frère était le mien aussi" (LA 128). This reflection and construction of the physical self through the means of other people and other bodies is a

[3] It could also be argued that the older and younger brothers are two mirrors who have an entirely different manifestation of the same temperament, as it is also said that the older brother "vivait [...] dans la peur" (LA 96). However, Joseph's violent reactions to this fear stand him in opposition to the younger brother, who reacts by becoming increasingly passive.

persistent theme in these texts, resulting in multiple ownership of the protagonist's physical self, a "dispersion du corps" (Chirol, 1992, 266). This mirrors the construction of the central figure's psychological selfhood, for as we have seen, other is always invested in self. This physical mirroring also blurs the boundaries between characters. As a result, the adolescent's love for her younger brother is conflated with her desire for the lover, whose body resembles "celui de Paulo dans quelques années" (ACN 95). The protagonist herself is said to resemble Paulo, and so the lover's desire for the central character is in turn associated with her brother through bodily resemblance.

The presence of Paulo greatly reduces the elder brother's power, meaning that communication between the central figure and the lover is facilitated and increased. It is therefore unsurprising that the principal focus of *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* should be the protagonist's relationship with the lover figure. This shift in focus illustrates some of the features of the mirror relationship. For instance, in these later accounts, the reader witnesses the effects of objectification within the mirror relationship, as the protagonist appears to lose some of her previous assertiveness. At times, this causes her to revert to a childish role, or even to become a mere plaything: "Il me douche, il me lave, il me rince, il adore, il me farde et il m'habille, il m'adore" (LA 79) – a great contrast to the narrator's commanding voice at the beginning of this text: "Sur le bac, regardez-moi [...]" (LA 24). The central figure's increasing weakness contrasts strongly with the lover's power, and so allows the reader to make the association between the active gaze and masculine authority. The contrast also provides the reader with an insight into the fragile and ever-changing balances of power that characterise the interpersonal mirror relationship. For instance, if we place the relationship

between the protagonist and the lover figure into a broader context, it seems as if the balance of power must always be maintained in a state of equilibrium. The lover figure, for example, is depicted as being in a position of inferiority in relation to his father, and so seeks out another mirror relationship in which he can assume power. This occurs when he assumes subject position in his relationship with the protagonist, as he takes control over her appearance and actions. As subject, he is also able to impose the self-image he desires, and have it reflected by the protagonist in her position as object. The central figure will later redress the balance of power when textually formalising their relationship, as she will be able to record herself as present, writing subject viewing her objectified, past self.

Characters are highly aware of the power dynamics of the mirror relationship: reflections can both bestow and reduce power. The reflected image can ensure a character's existence by confirming their self-image and by allowing them to exert control within the mirror relationship. This power, along with the value that society places on the visual, perhaps explains why image can also assume a material value. In other words, the object of the gaze has a price, as the protagonist is quick to learn: "C'était grâce à moi que le phono était arrivé ici [...]. Dans notre vie. C'était le prix du regard de M. Jo sur moi" (EC 62). This idea that the visual can be linked to financial reward is reinforced by M. Jo's 'gifts' of money and diamonds. However, the interpretation of these transactions by the two parties involved differs greatly, as their 'understood' meaning cannot be easily expressed. When the central character realises her 'worth', she makes every effort to exploit it, thus fusing the idea of visual and financial value. She therefore encourages M. Jo to consider her beauty as a financial investment by reminding him that she will

become "encore plus belle" (EC 74). She is effectively asking him to take a bet on her future visual value, in the hope of extorting a correspondingly high monetary profit. The protagonist has good reason to exploit her image in this way, for she shrewdly understands that the profits of the visual will extend far beyond the immediate gratification of material reward. Instead, these items represent her gateway to leaving the mother:

> C'était une chose d'une réalité à part, le diamant; son importance n'était ni dans son éclat, ni dans sa beauté mais dans son prix, dans ses possibilités inimaginables jusque-là pour elle, d'échange. C'était un objet, un intermédiaire entre le passé et l'avenir. C'était une clef qui ouvrait l'avenir et scellait définitivement le passé. (BCP 115)

In contrast, M. Jo's understanding of the transaction is somewhat confused. Whilst the protagonist has a long-term view of the potential gains of this visual and financial transaction, M. Jo strongly associates the exchange with immediate profit. This viewpoint superficially seems more focused, yet the lover figure cannot easily define what it is he is actually buying. The 'gift' of the phonograph simply purchases a glimpse of Suzanne's body, but M. Jo seems to believe that her image is now his to own. This misplaced belief is further demonstrated by his gifts of clothes and make-up. These 'gifts' suggest that he sees the protagonist's image as his property, and so he may manipulate her appearance as he wishes, a subject to which we shall return in Chapter II. The protagonist therefore risks becoming an "objet à lui [...]. Sans plus de nom. [...] Chose tout à coup inconnue, une enfant sans autre identité que celle de lui appartenir à lui, d'être à lui seul son bien" (ACN 99). However, the lover figure seems to forget that a selfhood necessarily

accompanies the external image, and that this selfhood is able to refuse or subvert the process of objectification.

It could be therefore be suggested that it is the protagonist who profits most from the lover figure's 'investments', as he never really receives his expected purchases. However, one crucial advantage arises from the lover figure's financial input. To the wider public, his relationship with the protagonist is seemingly transformed into a series of financial transactions, effectively legitimatising a liaison that would otherwise be prohibited by both families. The monetary exchange means that the central character's family make a material profit from the lover, thus satisfying one of their basic needs. It also allows them to deny any possibility of any love in this relationship: "[...] il est posé en principe que je ne l'aime pas, que je suis avec lui pour l'argent, que je ne peux pas l'aimer" (LA 65). At the same time, the monetary exchange means that the relationship is reduced to the level of prostitution in the eyes of M. Jo's father, who can therefore avoid 'losing face'. To a degree, then, the association of money with the relationship can eliminate concerns about the social acceptability of the cross-cultural relationship.

The lover figure's misplaced belief that seeing the other equates to ownership of their physical image also extends to a wider misinterpretation of how the visual and the psychological are (dis)connected. The central figure, for example, seems to believe that visual knowledge of the other holds the key to deeper, psychological knowledge: "Je la regardais beaucoup, presque tout le temps [...]. Je la regardais pour trouver, trouver qui c'était [...]" (LA 81-82). Of course, the visual can provide no more than a superficial knowledge of the other. The protagonist is accordingly reduced to generalisations and guesses

about other characters' thoughts, with speculations such as "elle doit trouver que [...]" (LA 33). The lack of 'readable' information available on the superficial image means that characters experience difficulty in 'seeing' one another: the protagonist and the lover figure seem almost "transparent" (BCP 93) to one another. Exceptions to this are rare, with the most compelling appearing at the end of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*: "Se voient" (ACN 225). Yet this example is not unproblematic, for at this moment the pair "ne se regardent pas" (ACN 225). Whilst this again suggests a failure on the part of the visual as a means of communication, the protagonist and the lover figure here achieve at least a certain level of understanding. This is a change which may be associated with the closure and resolution of the entire textual cycle.

Often, a character will engage in a one-way visual interaction with their 'other' when this other is incapable of meeting their gaze. This means that a character may look upon their 'other' without challenge. The lover figure, for instance, even looks at the protagonist "[l]es yeux fermés" (LA 121), "derrière mes paupières" (ACN 143), replacing her real image with his own appropriation of it. In his imagined version of textual reality, the lover can control how the protagonist acts as his mirror. For instance, the central figure can be projected into an invented sphere where her older brother's influence is not felt, and so the lover can imagine that she is constantly able to reflect his own desired self-image. Furthermore, as the inventor of the central figure's envisioned image, and as the author of the accompanying selfhood, he can easily 'read' and understand the image that the protagonist projects. As a result, their relationship potentially becomes easier to understand. This is in stark contrast to reality, however, where it seems that the more characters look at each other, the less they seem to know and comprehend: "Il la regarde

de toutes ses forces [...] pour la voir jusqu'au non-sens, jusqu'à ne plus la reconnaître" (ACN 220). It is almost as if a degree of visual and mental strain is experienced in their efforts to see that which can never be made visible.

The origins of this confusion about the role of the visual can perhaps be linked to learned attitudes, particularly in the case of the central character. Her bewilderment is unsurprising, as the implicit and explicit messages that the family unit provide about the visual are highly contradictory. The family's general attitude is that "[r]egarder [...], c'est déchoir. Aucune personne regardée ne vaut le regard sur elle. Il est toujours déshonorant" (LA 69). Yet the mother simultaneously encourages the visual 'marketing' of her daughter, and readily accepts the gifts and financial gains that result from the visual attention paid to the protagonist. The mother figure even seems to confuse the daughter's body with its monetary worth: "Elle a voulu me vendre, la mère, à la place du diamant" (EC 106). This conflict of interest between the protagonist's own ideals, and her family's opinions, perhaps explains the central figure's changing attitude towards her own visual availability. She initially considers the act of accepting something in return for the visual, and even the simple act of acknowledging the gaze, as a kind of prostitution (BCP 66-67; EC 43). However, with pressure from her family, she learns to profit from her visual 'worth', as we have explored above. It could be argued that the central figure's exploitative use of her appearance continues even at the moment of writing. This is particularly true in the case of *L'Amant*, which was reportedly written as a result of a commission (Duras/Pivot, 1984), and in which images of both past and present selves are overtly used as textual catalysts. The author's acceptation of this particular autobiographical project

therefore constitutes another possible exploitation of her physical and psychological self for financial profit.

The protagonist's identification of her visual 'worth' can be tracked across all four texts. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, the gaze of others, particularly in the public arena, causes great discomfort for the protagonist: "Plus on la remarquait, plus elle se persuadait qu'elle était scandaleuse, un objet de laideur et de bêtise intégrales" (BCP 174). Although the protagonist appears to be relatively comfortable using her appearance to manipulate the lover figure, she seemingly refuses to fully accept her status as an object of the gaze. This (probably unconscious) decision perhaps explains her lack of familial independence at the end of the narrative, as she resists the values of wider society. The central figure of *L'Éden Cinéma* demonstrates a similar attitude towards being viewed by others: "Je suis laide. [...] [J]e vais tomber morte de honte" (EC 109). Even though she understands that the gaze will allow her to "faire son chemin dans le monde" (EC 60). Accordingly, she returns once again to the family home at the conclusion of the text. However, the protagonist of *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is depicted as being increasingly comfortable with the gaze. Her acceptance of the gaze is a possible explanation for the shift in narrative focus in these later texts, which focus more upon her relationship with the lover figure. The movement of narrative action from the plain to the city further emphasises the central character's growing acceptance of the gaze by placing her into an arena where she can be publicly seen. The city also plays an important role in facilitating this acceptance, for it is in this environment that the protagonist initially realises that she exists as an entity to be viewed, and recognises her status as a young white woman in the colony. For the first time, she is able to perceive

herself "comme une autre" (LA 20): she is a body, and a self, to be seen and desired.

Furthermore, the city allows the protagonist to develop her own gaze, predominantly through repeated film viewings. As a medium which is so profoundly and ostensibly dependent upon the gaze as a means to create mood and meaning, film provides a useful model for the protagonist. For instance, the focus of the camera lens, and the gaze of the actor and spectator, demonstrate the reciprocal and circular nature of the gaze. The film can also be endlessly re-viewed until the movements and workings of the gaze are learnt. Equally importantly, this learning takes place in an atmosphere rendered non-threatening through its very artificiality. The auditorium is dark, hiding the protagonist from the gaze in a "nuit [...] consolante" (BCP 176), while any discomforting elements within the film are merely fictional and temporary. As a result of these 'lessons', the protagonist slowly becomes aware of the independence of her visual and psychological self. The illusorily perfect screen-world contrasts strongly to life on the plain, and as the protagonist repeatedly projects herself into the cinematic realm, the fictional reality of the film perhaps seems increasingly attractive and realistic: "la seule humanité qu'elle osait affronter était celle, mirobolante, rassurante, des écrans" (BCP 188). This disparity between what she has previously experienced, and what she now sees, perhaps suggests to the protagonist that it is better to be situated within the specular economy than outside of it.

The central figure's self-projection into an imagined future life, together with a newly acquired awareness of the gaze, awakens a desire for a more material independence: "Déjà, à force de voir tant de films, tant de gens s'aimer, [...]

déjà ce que Suzanne aurait voulu c'était de quitter la mère" (BCP 190). It is perhaps ironic that it should be film which initiates this desire for independence from her mother, as it was the mother who originally introduced her to this medium: "Elle nous emmenait avec elle à L'Éden" (EC 15). Thus, whilst the central character often escapes to the cinema in search of a known place of security, she is in fact moving away from the maternal figure. It could also be argued that the cinematic screen gradually becomes a replacement for the screen previously provided by the mother: in the same way that the mother's reflection provided the protagonist with an initial sense of an independent selfhood, film allows the protagonist to envision herself as an autonomous being and to project herself into the (imagined) adult world as subject.

However, the association of the gaze with the masculine means that the protagonist can only gain her desired familial independence by making herself visually available to male figures outside of the family unit. The initial stages of this process involve a literal re-visioning of the protagonist's image, often with the help of other women. For instance, the character of Carmen in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* purposefully dresses the protagonist in a manner that will attract male attention. She is entirely aware that this will in turn reduce the protagonist's dependence upon the mother figure. By accepting this manipulation, and therefore accepting to be viewed, the central figure hopes to become part of the "théâtre" (BCP 174) of the city, joining a society in which women seemingly exist only to be looked at or to look at one another. This society is later depicted in *L'Amant*: "Il y en a de très belles [...], elles prennent un soin extrême de leur beauté ici [...]. Elles ne font rien, elles se gardent seulement [...]. Elles attendent. Elles s'habillent pour rien. Elles se

regardent" (LA 27). Visual worth is therefore conventionally recognised and coveted by women in society, with the exception of the protagonist's mother. Whilst the mother figure occasionally seems to crave visual attention, complaining, for instance that "«[c]'est si je meurs seulement qu'il me regardera»" (BCP 225), she remains socially marginalised by her refusal to exist solely as a passive object of the gaze.

Although the protagonist appears to admire the tenacity of her mother, she has been warned by her brother not to repeat her mother's fate (BCP 265). As we have already explored, she has also learned that accepting the gaze can bring financial reward. As a result, the protagonist is perhaps more open to accepting a place within this society than her mother would be. However, the consequences of such a decision would not be entirely positive, for the central figure's worth would then be directly equated with her appearance. As a girl with "un corps, un visage de pauvre" (ACN 148) and clothes that are "soldes soldés" (ACN 204), her value is potentially insignificant. This is especially true when we also consider her family's relatively marginalised position in society: "Elle [la mère] venait de la brousse, elle était sans mari, elle avait trois enfants en charge, et elle était institutrice à l'école indigène, c'est-à-dire au dernier rang de la société blanche" (Duras/Pivot, 1984). As the protagonist of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* explains, even the most beautiful diamond would be useless to her, for without a correspondingly valuable image to accompany it, she would never be able to sell it. This implies that her image is itself 'unsaleable' despite her attempts to increase its 'worth' and appeal. This indeed proves to be the case in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, as the family can sell neither the diamond, nor the girl herself.

The central character therefore shows a great awareness of the notion of visual 'worth'. This allows her older, narrating self to remain sufficiently detached so as to evaluate her visual worth on her own terms. It often appears that the central figure's perception of beauty diverges from the more canonical version. In *L'Amant*, for example, the narrator declares a strong preference for her "visage détruit" (LA 10), in a rejection of the habitually valued image of youthful beauty[4]. Similarly, in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, the protagonist rejects manufactured images of conventional beauty by throwing the associated paraphernalia of face cream, make-up and dresses into the *rac* (BCP 300). By disposing of these gifts from M. Jo, Suzanne is effectively refusing to accept the image that he wishes to project onto her. Perhaps more importantly, the central figure of each of these texts creates her own mirror reflections by dividing the narrative voice into an onlooking 'je' and an acting 'elle'. This means that the central figure both gives and receives her own physical and psychological reflections, and can judge their 'value' against her own criteria.

This deliberate self-reflection allows the central figure to participate in the construction of a self-image that would otherwise exclusively be created by others. It is most interesting that the 'je-elle' division should most often take place when the protagonist loses her subject position within narrative events. Such objectification usually occurs during scenes with the lover figure. The rupture of speaking and acting selves produces a sense of dissociation and

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[4] Leah Hewitt reminds us that the narrator's pride in her physical appearance could be construed as risking the "threat of self-indulgence, [...] the danger of making oneself into a spectacle" (Hewitt, 1990, 108). However, it could be argued that these texts are perhaps more concerned with the manner in which the self is constructed than with the constructed self, and as a result, the image in question is simply being foregrounded in order to highlight the existence of this older, narrating self amongst many other central selves.

distance from the events being recounted, and this space allows the narrator to look upon her former, protagonist self. The central figure is then at once both subject and object. The protagonist, through her intrinsic link to the on-looking narrative voice, is by extension able to join the side of the viewer (that is to say, the lover, the narrator, and on another level, the reader). As a result, a certain level of power is regained. For instance, in the following example, the protagonist is almost doll-like in her passivity, but the older narrator (signalled by the use of the pronoun 'elle') looks upon and consequently redefines her younger self through the means of her own gaze: "Il la prend comme il prendrait son enfant. Il prendrait son enfant de même. Il joue avec le corps de son enfant, il le retourne, il s'en recouvre le visage, la bouche, les yeux." (LA 123). So, whilst the protagonist remains an object within the textual event, she is also transformed into an object of her own selfhood, for her narrator-self acts as her corresponding subject within an (internal) intersubjective relationship. As this new form of objectification is carried out by the formaliser of the narrative, who is herself a permutation of the protagonist, the younger self's desired textual image can be represented. In this way, the central figure reclaims ownership of both the self and of the scene: firstly, by reclaiming her former self-image, and secondly, by recording the larger account of the episode. The figure of the protagonist thus avoids total objectification.

The ability to rewrite and thus reposition oneself/one's self in this way is perhaps another factor that contributes to the protagonist's acceptance of the male gaze in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. Although the central figure would not have consciously known the manipulative power of writing, the inevitability of writing is often evident: "Je vais écrire des livres. C'est ce

que je vois au-delà de l'instant, dans le grand désert sous les traits duquel m'apparaît l'étendue de ma vie" (LA 126). The desire to recount a story can be located even before the actual physical act of writing itself, and prior to the awareness of any potential readership. This is demonstrated by the obsessive manner in which the protagonist orally rehearses the mother's story, regardless of whether her audience is listening: "Ça fait rien que tu n'écoutes pas. Tu peux même dormir. Raconter cette histoire c'est pour moi plus tard l'écrire. Je ne peux pas m'empêcher. Une fois j'écrirai ça: la vie de ma mère" (ACN 101). And, as the authorial voice of the footnote confirms, "[l]e pari a été tenu" (ACN 101).

These conscious textual references to writing bring us to the question of the role of the author, whose existence forms, to varying extents, part of the textualised being of the central character. The presence of the writing self is first indicated by the use of multiple temporal levels. These levels can be roughly defined as the moment(s) of experiencing, remembering, writing, and reading. This overlaying of different time phases helps to establish a mirror relationship between character and author, as past and present are given co-existence. So, whilst the author is primarily responsible for giving textual existence to the central character, the latter provides a mirror that reflects beyond the text to the writing self. The changing representations of the central figure therefore hint by reflection at progressions within the author's narrative priorities and personal reactions, resulting in another collision between truth and construct. This particular mirror relationship thus serves as a useful reminder that these texts are *histoires* in both senses of the word. The reader must beware of the hazard of supposing that these characters and their stories, in any one or in a combination of these texts, belong solely to the

realm of truth or fiction. In Chapters III and IV, we will return to the tension that exists between textualised and 'historic' realities and investigate the consequences for our reading expectations of an 'autobiographical' text.

Static Mirrors

As an adjunct to the intersubjective mirror, a number of static textual devices are also used to provide reflections. I have termed these devices 'static' mirrors, as their form is unchanging when in an 'unread' state. Upon interpretation, static mirrors are rendered fluid, laden with potentiality of meaning. This possibility of multiple interpretations demonstrates that the engagement of the gaze (and of different gazes) with the mirror results in a dynamic process of reflection and re-visioning. Here, we will demonstrate that static mirrors further support the sense of self afforded by intersubjective mirrors, and allow additional insight into the construction of the central self. As we shall explore, static mirrors can also act as textual catalysts, yet this can potentially destabilise the self at the very moment that it is being created. In this section, we will first explore how two minor static mirrors – the mother's letter and the film at the Éden Cinéma[5] - act intratextually to give characters a better sense of themselves and each other. This will be followed by an examination of photography, the predominant static mirror. We will observe that photographs are able to act both within and beyond the text, thus

[5] Whilst it can be argued that film is not strictly a 'static' mirror, it has been included in this category as it constitutes a device that supposedly pre-exists the text and that is later inserted into the narrative, just as the mother's letter apparently pre-exists, being reprinted later as part of the main narrative strand. In addition, the film being shown cannot change its content: it therefore cannot interact and evolve with the viewer in the same way as characters within an intersubjective mirror relationship.

inviting the reader to interpret the sense of self gleaned from intersubjective mirror reflections.

As the only 'purely' written static mirror, the mother's letter in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinema* is unusual (BCP 269-279; EC 127-133). The letter can be described as an important mirror for the central character, as the formative events of her childhood – the reasons for her family's poverty, the difficulties of life on the plain, the causes of her mother's bitterness and despair - are recounted not by the her own voice, but by her mother's. Usually, the mother's speech is textually communicated solely in reported format by the central figure. This effectively means that the mother's words are transformed into the child's own, as they are filtered through the daughter's consciousness in the process of writing. The central figure can even choose to marginalise the mother to such an extent that she is completely silenced, "statufiée [...], separée [...] de sa propre histoire" (EC 12). She thus becomes the "objet du récit" (EC 12) in the most literal sense, for "[l]a mère [...] n'aura jamais la parole sur elle-même" (EC 12). The inclusion of the mother's letter is therefore a rare chance for the reader to have extensive and relatively unmediated access to the mother's words, providing an insight into her personal understanding of her family's situation. This information may in turn be used to further explain aspects of the mother-daughter mirror relationship, and in particular the reasons that underlie the conflict that they experience.

We might note the significance of the format used to convey this information. The inclusion of this content as a 'received' letter means that the author can include material which might have been considered unacceptable in a

conventional narrative. The author-narrator's responsibility is thus diminished, as the content of the letter can be attributed solely to the mother, the assumed author of this 'historic' source – and of course, the main protagonist of the information contained within it. In any case, the inclusion of the letter remains dependant upon the will of the writing self. This raises questions relating to the letter's accuracy, for the fluid nature of truth and fiction in these texts means that the content could well be altered at the moment of textualisation, or even entirely invented. The letter thus provides a warning of potentially 'problematic' issues that also exist on a textual and intertextual level, for as we shall see in Chapter III and IV, the content of the underlying story also proves to be open to alteration and invention, seemingly at will.

Nonetheless, the author-narrator of *L'Éden Cinéma* insists on the importance of including her mother's ('unedited') words: "Si inadmissible que soit cette violence, il m'est apparu plus grave de la passer sous silence que d'en mutiler la figure de la mère. Cette violence a existé pour nous, elle a bercé notre enfance" (EC 158). The letter is both an opportunity for the mother to reclaim ownership of her "propre histoire" (EC 12), and a recognition on the part of the narrator that this past, however uncomfortable it may be, constitutes a formative part of the pair's identity. The juxtaposition of the mother's account with that of the daughter – as provided in the main narrative strand - usefully reminds us that the truth of the past cannot be considered absolute, but is instead relative, altering according to the character who experiences it. Therefore, the mother's account of the family's past will never quite match that of the narrator's, for whilst their viewpoints are inextricably linked, they are not identical. Neither will the narrator's understanding of the 'truth' of her

existence ever correspond to strict biographical fact, for this truth must necessarily exist as it was and is experienced, and so will always be subjective.

The second minor static mirror is the film at the Éden Cinéma, a subject matter which has already been partially addressed in this chapter. The nature of the mirror provided by film differs slightly from that of the mother's letter, as it does not involve the intermediary of a second character. However, it too provides a reliable and 'safe' mirror for the central character. The protagonist demonstrates a keen awareness of these qualities. For example, in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifque,* she escapes into the Éden Cinéma in order to shelter from the gaze. This provides comfort in three ways. Firstly, as we have already suggested, the cinema is associated with the familiarity (if not safety) of the mother. As children, for instance, the protagonist and her brother slept under the piano at their mother's feet (EC 15; BCP 264), unaware of the spectators looking at them. Taking refuge in the cinema auditorium is thus a regression to a time before she was aware of the gaze and its associated 'value'. Secondly, and more importantly, the cinema is a place where visual confrontation is almost completely eliminated. The darkness protects Suzanne from the gaze of other spectators, so that she remains unaware of any visual interest in her. Finally, the choreographed nature of film allows Suzanne to feel more secure than if she were encountering the gaze of real people. Nothing is unpredictable or confrontational: "C'était là seulement, devant l'écran que ça devenait simple" (BCP 209). When watching the film, she is free to assume subject position, unchallenged, in relationship to the actors on the screen. If they should look into the audience, their gaze remains unfocused,

shared with a whole room of spectators: a generic looking *past*, rather than looking *at*.

Although Suzanne finds some comfort in her new-found position of power, the impossibility of a naturalistic two-way interaction causes her own sense of vision to betray her. The constructed film characters are unable to give her any visual feedback, and as a result, her grip on reality grows somewhat tenuous. Her visual interpretation becomes dysphorically distorted: "Une fois qu'elles sont proches à se toucher, on les mutile de leur corps. Alors, dans leurs têtes de décapités, on voit ce qu'on ne saurait voir [...]" (BCP 177). Neither is her anxiety at being looked at entirely assuaged, as the static mirror cannot overturn her belief that she is "méprisable des pieds à la tête" (BCP 175). This means that although the cinematic experience enables the protagonist to feel "calme et rassurée" (BCP 177), she must continue searching for her brother: "Elle se remit à chercher Joseph mais pour d'autres raisons que tout à l'heure, parce qu'elle ne pouvait se résoudre à rentrer. Et aussi parce que jamais encore elle n'avait eu un tel désir de rencontrer Joseph" (BCP 177). The protagonist therefore recognises that her brother can resolve the difficult practical aspects of her situation, a task which would be impossible for the characters of the cinematically constructed world. More importantly, Joseph's role as intersubjective mirror allows him to provide the positive affirmation of her selfhood absent from her interactions with the film's characters, even if the central figure herself cannot name this desire for a stable reflection.

This suggests that however 'safe' the visual relationship with a 'static' mirror might seem, the first recourse would more naturally be to the intersubjective

mirror. Not only are static mirrors incapable of feedback, they are also limited in their capacity for interpretation by the reflected self. As their basic form is unchanging, the reflection they provide does not develop in accordance with the person being reflected. This is in contrast to an intersubjective mirror relationship, where both parties would constantly be in evolution. Furthermore, the meaning construed by the 'reader' of the static mirror is entirely of his/her own construction. As a result, the reflection given by the static mirror does not need to be even remotely related to the person seeking confirmation of their self-image. As an illustration, it could be said that the images on the screen at the Éden Cinéma can be arbitrarily chosen. The protagonist could have entered an auditorium where the film being shown was a love story or a horror film, and in both cases she would have found some element of safety. Yet neither would have provided the personalised feedback that the central figure required in order to gain a better hold on her selfhood. It must also be noted that the cinematic mirror can be completely inappropriate for some characters. For instance, the protagonist manages to receive a reflection (albeit distorted) from the cinematic mirror, yet her mother cannot focus upon the screen at all: "«[...] Quand j'essayais de regarder l'écran c'était terrible, la tête me tournait. C'était une bouillie noire et blanche qui dansait au-dessus de ma tête et qui me donnait le mal de mer»" (BCP 265).

Nevertheless, static mirrors do prove to be extremely useful when acting alongside intersubjective mirrors. This is particularly true of photographs, the most prevalent of the static mirrors, which repeatedly help to overcome the difficulties of verbal and visual communication. The central character finds that there are voids which cannot be breached through the normal pathways

of looking and speaking, as communication of all kinds is limited within the family unit. This is even true of visual exchange. Such an impasse is particularly problematic when we consider that the gaze has a crucial role in creating mirror reflections of the self. Additional support is therefore required in order to normalise the highly dysfunctional communicative relationships within the family unit. In *L'Amant*, we will see that a number of 'real' photographs are occasionally used as a means of facilitating the act of looking upon and superficially knowing the other. However, it must be noted that the imagined photograph envisioned by the central self – the "image absolue" (LA 17) – plays a rather different role. Indeed, the shifting nature of the image, and its potential for further mutability, means that its subject resists being definitively 'known'. We will explore the use of this particular photograph later in this section.

The 'real' photographs of *L'Amant* are first useful in that they enable each member of the family to view themselves, just as in a reflection from a regular but fixed mirror image. In effect, looking at photographs transforms each family member into an 'other' to their own self. As a result, each sees him/herself as others do, "[c]ar la photographie, c'est l'avènement de [soi-même] comme autre: une dissociation retorse de la conscience d'identité" (Barthes, 1980, 28). The result is an unexpected mirror image of oneself and one's self as other, inviting the viewer to re-vision his or her own evaluation of their own self and selfhood: "On est toujours soit confondu, soit émerveillé, toujours étonné, devant sa propre photo. C'est soi qu'on voit le moins, dans la vie, y compris dans cette fausse perspective du miroir" (VM 113-114).

Ironically, although the subjectivity of the imaged figure cannot be conveyed on the surface image of the photograph, the family find that the act of viewing the other is also greatly facilitated by the use of photographs. When presented with a photographic image, each member of the family can take up subject position in relation to the depicted 'other' without feeling threatened, as the crystallised figure in the photograph cannot return their gaze. Each character may therefore look leisurely at the photographed versions of themselves and others. This safe viewing position is advantageous in that each person, as subject, can freely impose their own interpretation on what they see. The meaning of the mirror reflection can thus be distorted in order to correspond to the viewer's own desires. These personal interpretations are never verbally communicated, however: "Les photos, on les regarde, on ne se regarde pas mais on regarde les photographies, sans un mot de commentaire" (LA 115). Verbalising an interpretation would impose a subjective viewpoint on the other, thus risking further conflict. The static mirror of the photograph therefore acts as a visual mediator by allowing family members to 'see' one another, but it has the possibly negative consequence of enforcing a verbal silence.

It is important to note that whilst mirror relationships formed via the photographic mirror appear more ordered, they are also somewhat falsified in nature. The mirror relationship with the 'real' person is replaced with an illusory interaction with a fixed and fictionalised version of this same self. Despite this artificiality, photographic mirror relationships give the family a sense of normality. When the family group examines photographs together, it is as if they are spellbound, and their conflicts laid aside. At these times, the family seemingly constitutes a unit, rather than a group of individuals. This

can partially be attributed to the reduced visual conflict described above, but is also explained by the photograph's ability to create an alternative narrative of one's existence. A succession of photographic images can be used to form a realm where both self and past may be re-visioned and re-narrated, and thus be redefined in a positive light. Characters may therefore be replaced with two-dimensional, 'perfect' versions of themselves. Tension is then eliminated, as conflict does not correspond with the new familial myth.

Photography can also normalise the family through its status as a customary and socially popular act. The family's yearly visits to the photographer effectively represent participation in a common societal rite. Photography therefore temporarily locates the family within mainstream society by making them seem the same as 'normal' families, and by allowing the mother to 'see' her children in a more conventional way: "Ma mère nous fait photographier pour pouvoir nous voir, voir si nous grandissons normalement. Elle nous regarde longuement comme d'autres mères, d'autres enfants" (LA 115). The mother then shows these pictures to her sisters. This is perceived as socially expected behaviour amongst family members: "ses cousines c'est ce qui reste de la famille, alors elle leur montre les photos de la famille" (LA 117). This action therefore constitutes a normalising act, and is one that belies the underlying situation. In reality, the daughter's behaviour is so unacceptable that she is unwelcome in her aunts' houses in person. It is rather as though her "conduite scandaleuse" (LA 117) could be visually infectious, transmitted simply through seeing her in person. Her presence will only be tolerated in the form of the photograph, as if the potency of the daughter's misbehaviour is somehow diminished by the mediating act of photography. In the still image, the daughter's disgrace can also pass unsuspected, for without verbal

or written commentary the aunts would probably find in the photograph what they wish to see there: an ordinary young girl. Thus, in showing off her photographs, the mother literally produces a show - a theatrical pretence in both content and format - of familial normality.

The nature of the photographs described in *L'Amant* highlights their potential for false interpretation. The majority of photographs described are portraits, and as such, they are deliberately and ostensibly posed. This produces a degree of insincerity which may then be misinterpreted as truth. For instance, the children are grouped together in these portraits for reasons of economy, but the viewer might be led to believe that the image depicts unified and happy siblings (LA 116). The mother's photograph, as one of the "portraits [...] retouchés" (LA 118), is falsified to an even greater extent. The manipulation of her photographed image results in a loss of her distinguishing features, and her face becomes unrecognisable from the photographed faces of the native people: "Ils avaient tous le même air [...]. Et cet air qu'avait ma mère dans la photographie [...] était le leur, [...] effacé" (LA 119). This resemblance possibly serves as a reminder of the family's status in the colony: their existence is closer to that of the native people than to that of the majority of French families. The lack of informal family photographs further emphasises their marginalised position. It is only when friends visit from beyond the plain that amateur photographs of the group are taken (LA 116-117). These photographs, and the modern act of everyday family photography, belong to a world from which the family is largely excluded. As a result, such photographs are rarely depicted in the narrative.

The imagined photograph *of L'Amant* also provides a distorted self-image, as it is even more deliberately falsified than the photographs described above. Its lack of fixity suggests that it is more concerned with narrative possibility and with the notion of authorship as a creative process, than with recording 'fact'. The importance placed on 'possibility' continues to highlight the disparity between the actual and expected functions of these autobiographical texts, by drawing attention to the interplay between invented textual elements and biographical fact. In *L'Amant*, we are effectively being asked to believe in a photograph which does not exist. This can cause the reader to question whether other photographs, and indeed the autobiographical account itself, is similarly fabricated, for "[q]uelle part de réel peut donc être attribuée à un récit [...] dont le point de départ est une photographie qui n'a jamais été prise" (Armel, 1990, 19)? However, the deliberately staged nature of the imagined photograph is useful in demonstrating the multiple statuses of the central figure. Indeed, the 'je-elle' split between narrator and protagonist is emphasised, as the older narrator is shown to be viewing her younger, photographed self. As a result, the objective lens of the camera becomes subjective. This also means that there is no intermediate photographer standing between the self captured in the image and the viewing self, so the central self can claim full authorship/ownership of her photographed counterpart.

The resulting control that the narrator has over the imagined image is then made evident by her constant re-visioning of the image's content. In the non-existent photograph, the depicted image may be incessantly rewritten and re-presented, and none of these variations need to adhere to the 'truth' of the event. The imagined photograph is free from the referential constraints of the

regular photograph, opening the depicted self up to reinvention: "Ce jour-là je dois porter cette fameuse paire de talons hauts en lamé or. Je ne vois rien d'autre que je pourrais porter ce jour-là, alors je les porte. [...] C'est ma volonté" (LA 18-19). The protagonist's "talons hauts en lamé or" are therefore not included out of photographic fact, but because they correspond to the narrator's capriciously re-visioned self-image. In contrast, other static mirrors are unable to function in this way. For instance, the simple desire to see oneself/one's self differently cannot alter the basic recorded version of one's image in a conventional photograph. Nor can it alter the reading of one's own mirror image, despite the fact that the viewing self is both subject and object of its own gaze. This is discovered by the protagonist: "Elle se regarda dans la glace et chercha sans le trouver un signe quelconque qui l'eût éclairée" (BCP 97). This suggests that the central figure's attempts to re-vision her own self and image are only possible within a realm constructed by the author. This also holds true on a textual and intertextual level, as we will explore in Chapter III and IV.

The inclusion of the imagined photograph alongside the 'real' photographs of *L'Amant* further confuses the boundaries of truth and fiction. The medium of photography is culturally associated with authenticity: "A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture" (Sontag, 1979, 5). In *La Vie Materielle*, Duras also suggests that photography has a fixing power that somehow makes its referent more 'real': "on allait se faire photographier chez le photographe du village [...] – cela pour exister davantage" (VM 112). This assumed accuracy elevates the fiction of the imagined photograph to the level of fact. Yet by

making the fictional photograph a 'fact', the facticity of the 'real' photographs is devalued. This means that the 'truth' of the conventional photographs is then reduced to a fictional level. At the same time, the meaning of the photographic image is shown to be arbitrary: as real photographs are falsified, and imagined photographs become 'real', it becomes apparent that the photographs described have no inherent meaning, but are defined in relationship to each other through the interplay of numerous visual and textual signifiers. As such, the truth of the imaged self within the textual realm is further destabilised, as this meaning must be interpreted, and may therefore be altered, by the reader's interaction with the text. While the photographed self may experience the act of photography as fixing: "je ne suis ni un sujet ni un objet, mais plutôt un sujet qui se sent devenir object" (Barthes, 1980, 30), reader interpretation will ensure that this selfhood is always in some way mobile.

The confusion of truth and fiction is worsened by the manner in which all of these photographs are shown: they are written, rather than visually displayed. This is obviously beneficial in that it allows Duras to include photographs which do not materially exist. She may also elevate photographs to the same level as the written narrative by giving them an important role in relating the autobiographical story. Furthermore, the inclusion of photographs in written form allows the author to guide the reader's reactions to the images. An uncaptioned, visually present photograph would leave the reader free to interpret what he/she sees, but the unseen but written photograph has already been interpreted by the writer through the process of imagining and recording. The resulting account will then insidiously promote the writer's intentions, as the connotations of each word lead the reader

towards a certain interpretation of the image. In this way, our 'reading' of the photographs is directed, in what is almost a "guided voyeurism" (Best, 1999, 108).

Finally, the use of several photographs, both real and imagined, highlights the co-existence of underlying multiplicity and superficial unity within the autobiographical self. Linda Haverty Rugg explains:

> On the one hand, photographs disrupt the singularity of the autobiographical pact by pointing to a plurality of selves; not only this image but this one, this one, and that one are the author. On the other hand, photographs in an autobiographical context also insist on something material, the *embodied* subject, the unification (to recall the autobiographical pact) of author, name *and* body. (Rugg, 1997, 13)

So, whilst the self depicted in a single photograph appears to be frozen by the act of photography, a comparison of many photographs will reveal the changing guises of the self. This in turn reminds the reader that the psychological selfhood of the subject depicted in the photograph is also evolving, even if this cannot be evidenced on the surface image. Whilst the culturally assigned facticity of the photograph invites us to link the photographed self with the speaking voice, we must avoid the trap of confusing knowledge of the photographed subject's superficial appearance with knowledge of her selfhood. As Susan Sontag observes, "[p]hotography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks" (Sontag, 1979, 23). To some extent, the inclusion of both real

and imagined photographs discourages the reader from making such a simplistic assumption, for truth and fiction, and thus the nature of autobiography, are called into question.

The extra-textual mirror

The reader constitutes a critically important mirror, for it is through our interaction with the text that the selfhood of the central character gains full existence. In other words, the reader's input is necessary in order to give this selfhood meaning, for "[t]he literary phenomenon is not only the text, but also its reader and all of the reader's possible reactions to the text – both *énoncé* and *énonciation*" (Riffaterre, 1983, 3). Whilst the written words which constitute the selfhood of the central character never change, the form and meaning attributed to it may alter during the process of our interaction with the texts. This is highlighted by Gill Rye: "At each time of reading, each reader brings different perspectives to the text and takes away different experiences of it" (Rye, 2001, 41). The reader is therefore in a position of great interpretive power. Our freedom to interpret, however, must also be balanced by the writer's desired interpretation of the text. These works are therefore open-ended, with the many gaps and contradictions in the narrative encouraging the reader to engage in interpretation. Yet the author simultaneously employs certain strategies for directing our reading, in order to create a 'co-authored' selfhood. This is a phenomenon which will also be explored in Chapter IV as a basis for intertextually produced meaning.

The reader's role as an extra-textual mirror is largely similar to that of an intratextual intersubjective mirror. This element of the reader's role is particularly evident in the case of our relationship with the central figure, as it is through her voice that we interact with the texts. By declining to provide the reader with a clearly delineated central character, Duras allows, or even encourages, the reader to actively participate in the construction of the protagonist's selfhood. The reader thus gains some creative power, contributing another reflection to the production of the central figure's composite sense of self. Evidently, like characters within the text, the reader is not without bias: it is likely that we will impose upon the protagonist many of the characteristics that we are hoping to find in her. In most cases, this will mean that we will respond favourably to the protagonist, and therefore to the text which she narrates. At the same time, our participation in the construction of character means that we are able to gain insight into the power, and potential pitfalls, of the intersubjective mirror relationship.

As readers, we have a highly privileged relationship to the texts as a whole, with open access to every reflection contributed by the characters. Together, these reflections produce a more rounded, although not unproblematic picture of the protagonist, as we will see in Chapters III and IV. Yet Duras' awareness of the potential utility of the reader as a tool in the production of character extends far beyond the expected role of gathering and interpreting reflections[6]. Indeed, Duras proves to be fully conscious of how the reader can also be used as an internal textual mirror. The reader is therefore openly invited to join in the acts of looking and seeing within the texts: "regardez-

[6] This audience awareness appears to increase in each text, perhaps due to the writer's growing consciousness of her public popularity. See Chapter IV for further discussion of this topic.

moi" (LA 24). This involvement takes the reader beyond the expected levels of intellectual engagement to an active participation as a textual agent. We, the reader, are thus simultaneously invited to view the protagonist from our habitual, extra-textual perspective, and from the viewpoints of other characters of varying levels of visual/textual influence. The reader is even positioned alongside the narrating voice, looking with her upon the younger protagonist. The act of re-situation is achieved almost imperceptibly through the use of inclusive pronouns: "C'est dans le regard qu'il a sur elle qu'*on* devinerait qu'il va l'aimer, qu'il ne se trompe pas" (ACN 76, emphasis added). This repositioning could result from a possible desire for the narrative to be understood: we are literally made to share the central figure's viewpoint at the moment of remembering and retelling. Another common standpoint is alongside the older brother. This occurs, for instance, in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, in the scene where the mother beats the protagonist (BCP 126-128). On this occasion, our re-situation is achieved by our position as outsider in terms of the action of the scene: like Joseph, we are also 'watching' the events unfold. Our positioning alongside such a textually powerful figure indicates our own level of influence and authority, and suggests that the central figure seeks the reader's approval in the same way that she desires the approval of her revered older brother.

The manipulation of our viewpoint makes an objective understanding of the use of mirrors in these texts even more difficult. Although our repositioning initially seems to provide us with a privileged standpoint, it is also highly problematic, as it becomes difficult to distinguish textual opinion from our own. It is tempting to uncritically accept what we observe, in the same way that characters think that to see is to know, as our multiple intra- and extra-

textual viewpoints may cloud our perception of the texts. This is to say that our position both within and outside of the textual realm can cause our view of the central character to become confused and conflicting. Movement between viewpoints therefore allows us to understand not only how the self is constructed by multiple sources of reflection, but allows us to appreciate how this construction is experienced by the protagonist.

It can therefore be concluded that intersubjective, static, and extra-textual mirrors all play an important role in providing reflections to create the central figure's composite selfhood. However, the unreliable and shifting nature of mirror reflections, particularly within the intersubjective mirror relationship, means that this selfhood is repeatedly destabilised. This gives rise to an experience of construction that can be described as "dizzying" (Best, 1999, 162) for the central figure. Yet the reading self's experience of reading this 'self' also becomes disconcerting as the mechanics by which it is produced are gradually revealed. The illusory nature of the central figure's selfhood is exposed not only to the protagonist herself, but to us, the reader. In the following chapter, we will see how the lack of a coherent view of the central self is further complicated by a manipulation of her image and behaviour. This intra-textual re-visioning, born out of a divergence between the desired view of oneself/one's self and that desired by others, raises important questions for the reliability of the reflected selfhood.

II

Optical Illusions: Manipulated Images, Distorted Reflections

In the preceding chapter, we proposed that the central figure's psychological selfhood is constructed by multiple mirror reflections. We will now see that the interpretation of intersubjective mirror reflections can be influenced by manipulation of the central self's physical manifestation. We will first examine how and why characters manipulate the central figure in this way, and then explore the protagonist's reaction to this behaviour. Finally, we will see that changes made to the central figure's image and behaviour are potentially problematic for viewer and reader, as the already plural textualised self is further multiplied by physical re-visioning.

Manipulation by the other

As established in Chapter I, both the mother's gaze and the male gaze hold great power over the protagonist. In this section, we will primarily examine how these two forces control the protagonist's outward appearance. As we shall explore, the power of the male gaze within textual society is such that male characters are not only able to indirectly influence, but can also actively manipulate the central self's external image. We will therefore begin by examining the role of the lover figure, for as a male character, he belongs to the section of society which defines and evaluates visual 'worth'. This in turn means that he understands how this worth will be appraised by others. He is also the first male figure to view the central figure as a young adult, rather

than as a child, which enables him to evaluate her current visual worth in a way that is not possible for her family. We will then turn to the role of the mother figure, for her own influence over and reaction to her daughter's image are also often coloured by consideration for the male gaze.

The lover figure is therefore well placed to cultivate the protagonist's new image, and to instruct her in the importance of a 'valuable' appearance. Such a conception of image effectively transforms beauty into a measurable commodity to be rewarded with financial and social gain. Consequently, the protagonist's success at being an object of the male gaze will ensure her own acceptance in society, but will also be beneficial for the lover figure: his own status should also improve if he is seen with the accessory of a beautiful young woman. He therefore makes specific plans to 'show off' the protagonist by exposing her to the public gaze in his company: "On irait danser, tout le monde vous regarderait. Vous seriez la plus belle de toutes" (BCP 112). The creation of the protagonist's new image therefore becomes a project for the lover figure, and takes particular priority in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma.* In these texts, the lovers are predominantly portrayed in the context of society, so there is increased pressure for the protagonist's appearance to be deemed 'valuable'. In contrast, the lovers of *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* are relatively isolated. As a result, their concern for visual 'worth' is limited to their immediate evaluations of one another's appearance. This could perhaps explain the transformation of the formerly unattractive lover (BCP 38) into a more handsome man (ACN 36), as the individual's opinion of beauty takes precedence over that of society. This change in portrayal, and the possible motives for this change, will be further explored in Chapter III.

The importance of maintaining an attractive appearance (as defined by society) is foregrounded in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* by M. Jo's first gifts to Suzanne. Many of these gifts are conventional accessories used in the creation of a canonical, male-assessed image of female beauty: "un poudrier, du vernis à ongles, du rouge à lèvres, du savon fin et de la crème de beauté" (BCP 65; see also EC 59). The central figure's natural image is therefore transformed into a chemical, artificial version, suggesting that beauty in its natural state is understood to be without value[7]. Amongst these 'gifts', make-up is especially significant, for the accepted association of cosmetics with womanhood means that the wearer of make-up is literally marked out as visually (and sexually) 'available'. The use of cosmetics also makes the protagonist's features bolder, thus attracting the gaze of others. Meanwhile, her youth is disguised, and so the viewer is invited to see the central figure as an autonomous young adult. This is a particularly important consequence, as the protagonist is forced to find independence at a younger age than usual due to her family situation, as we saw in Chapter I. The altered version of her image is perhaps equally useful to the onlooker. Indeed, constructed beauty is perhaps more comprehensible, as the exaggerated features of the made-up face can be more easily 'read'. The artificial nature of the altered surface also renders it more predictable, as the external manifestation of the viewed self will remain superficially constant.

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[7] In the same way, it could be said that the history behind these texts is valueless until it too is transformed into something resembling, but not quite, itself. It is only as the past is re-visioned into an alternative, re-worked version that it can be made textually visible and be fully engaged with by the reading 'other'.

The simplistic nature of this act of manipulation demonstrates that the protagonist's image can be easily altered or distorted by other characters. By merely providing the material to change her image, the lover figure directs the alteration of the protagonist's appearance. In addition, his gift alters her behaviour, for she effectively carries out the manipulation herself by using these products. The result is that the protagonist shifts towards a more two-dimensional existence, for both her original image and behaviour are masked: they are literally painted over. Indeed, the central figure seemingly becomes an artist's approximation of herself. This is particularly evident in an episode from *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique,* where the protagonist simultaneously assumes the role of both artist's model and canvas for M. Jo. Beautifully dressed, and staged amongst many of the trappings of conventional feminine beauty, she is physically stilled in M. Jo's "œuvre":

> [...] M. Jo apprenait à Suzanne l'art de se vernir les ongles. Suzanne était assise en face de lui. Elle portait une belle robe de soie bleue qu'il lui avait apportée, parmi d'autres choses, depuis le phonographe. Sur la table, étaient disposés trois flacons de vernis à ongles de couleur différente, un pot de crème et un flacon de parfum.
>
> – Quand vous m'avez enlevé les peaux, ça me pique, grogna Suzanne.
>
> [...]
>
> – C'est celui-ci qui vous va le mieux, dit-il enfin, contemplant son œuvre en connaisseur. (BCP 91)

It is inevitable that the eye of the "connaisseur" judging this 'artwork' is male. As we have established, only a male figure, as the societally determined holder of the gaze, is able to determine beauty. As a result, M. Jo takes sole

responsibility in determining the most suitable colour of nail varnish, just as the painter alone decides the most appropriate shade of paint. The protagonist is apathetic in response to M. Jo's choice: "Elle n'avait pas d'avis très défini sur la question" (BCP 91). This can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, the central figure has had little exposure to societal ideals of beauty, and so she is relatively unable to decide which shade of nail varnish would be seen as most flattering. Secondly, there is little motivation for the protagonist to give her opinion, for it is almost inconsequential. Considerations for the male gaze must instead be prioritised. Even at this early stage in the protagonist's exposure to society's ideals of beauty, it seems that she has already begun to internalise the objectified role of the superficial, feminine image. This role greatly contrasts with her behaviour within the family unit, where she is portrayed as active, even tomboyish: "Emmène-moi [dans une chasse de nuit], dit Suzanne, emmène-moi, Joseph" (BCP 30). Yet the protagonist must necessarily assume a more inactive role in order to be accepted in society, as passivity and superficiality is expected of women: in these texts, women exist to be seen, and not heard.

Manipulation of external appearance therefore risks a negative impact upon the protagonist's own sense of self-image and self-worth, as her original image and behaviour are deemed socially worthless, and her opinions are of little importance. These harmful aspects of the (imposed) quest for societally defined beauty are echoed in the physical discomfort caused by this manipulation: "ça me pique" (BCP 91). It seems that although becoming an object of the gaze may bring social and financial rewards, sacrifices are also involved in the process of altering one's image. Yet whilst manipulation of image may cause physical pain, or affect the protagonist's own self-view, it

may also affect other characters. It is the cause of much psychological tension in her relationships with others, including in the mother-daughter relationship. This is clearly evoked in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique,* when the protagonist replaces her mother's cast-off dress with a new one provided by M. Jo (alluded to, BCP 65). The daughter's decision to wear this new dress implies a definitive rejection of her mother's values, as the protagonist begins to replace her learnt attitudes towards appearance with an appreciation of beauty as it is defined by society. In this way, accepting manipulation and its consequences necessitates a movement away from one's original values and beliefs. In turn, this may potentially create a distance between the manipulated self and the character who bequeathed these values, as happens here between the protagonist and her mother. Becoming an object of the gaze is therefore not without cost for either self or other.

Image manipulation also creates a more literal distance between the protagonist and her family, for the increased 'visibility' that the manipulated image brings promises material independence. The protagonist appears to welcome such consequences, as she very strongly wishes to be part of the outside world: "Ce que j'étais n'était pas fait pour être caché. Mais pour être vu. Pour faire son chemin dans le monde. [...] La lumière devait se faire sur ce mystère, cette jeune fille" (EC 60). As a result, she accepts M. Jo's manipulation despite her adored brother's obvious dislike for her new appearance: "Te voilà bien, dit Joseph à Suzanne, tu sais pas te farder, on dirait une vraie putain" (BCP 100). His disdain is perhaps understandable: another man is influencing his sister, whereas before only he had power; and this man is possibly taking his place in her affections. Furthermore, the interest of this outsider might enable his sister to leave the family home

without him. If the older brother maintained his sister's 'invisibility', she would be forced to remain dependent upon the family. Her presence at home would then ensure him a constant and unfaltering source of self-reflection. It could also be argued that prolonged invisibility guarantees that the protagonist remains unaware of the gaze for as long as possible, thus maintaining something of her childhood innocence. Even if Joseph does indeed wish to protect his sister, his lack of communication skills means that he can only hope to achieve his aim using aggression. As a result, his behaviour paradoxically risks encouraging the protagonist to accept further manipulation in order to escape life on the plain.

We might ask whether the central figure might find that some forms of manipulation, or the influences of certain manipulators, are more acceptable than others. In this instance, the protagonist's decision to accept M. Jo's manipulation will allow her to escape the influence of her mother and brother. This promise of increased independence means that she is in effect choosing a form of manipulation that will potentially prove beneficial. Yet it must be remembered that although the protagonist is liberated from her older brother's control, the influence of the lover figure is increased. To a certain extent, the mother will also remain influential, as she will encourages the protagonist to take on the new, highly visible image designed by M. Jo. As we have witnessed in other situations, it seems that the balance of power is thus maintained in a state of equilibrium, with the effects of one change influencing another, as the brother's loss of control is substituted by M. Jo's increased authority.

Maternal collusion and ambivalence

It has therefore been established that the effects of the lover figure's manipulation of the protagonist's image reach far beyond the immediate agents involved. The first, desired consequence of image manipulation will affect society, as the protagonist becomes increasingly 'visible'. However, we have also seen that the central figure's family is simultaneously and (un)intentionally affected. In this section, we will continue to examine the consequences of manipulation for the mother-daughter mirror relationship. In particular, we will explore how the complex nature of image manipulation causes the mother to oscillate between encouraging and opposing the alteration of her daughter's image.

Although (or perhaps because) image manipulation will cause her daughter to become increasingly open to objectification by the male gaze, the mother figure facilitates a certain degree of alteration in her daughter's appearance. The most prominent example of such behaviour is the mother's purchase of the protagonist's "chapeau d'homme" (LA 20), a gift with transformative power:

> [...] sous le chapeau d'homme, la minceur ingrate de la forme, ce défaut de l'enfance, est devenue autre chose. Elle a cessé d'être une donnée brutale, fatale, de la nature. Elle est devenue, tout à l'opposé, un choix contrariant de celle-ci, un choix de l'esprit. Soudain, voilà qu'on l'a voulue. Soudain je me vois comme une autre, comme une autre serait vue, au-dehors, mise à la disposition [...] de tous les

> regards, mise dans la circulation des villes, des routes, du désir. (LA 20)

The hat thus takes on an almost theatrical aspect, acting as a costume that enables the protagonist to re-vision herself as a deliberately created 'character' within her own textual/visual world. We might consider this new identity to be performatively produced, as the 'new' selfhood created by this item of clothing is in fact a "*fabrication* [...] manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler, 1999, 173). The resulting illusion of a coherent selfhood is then played out not only to others, but also to the central figure herself, so that she is transformed in her own and in our estimation into a young woman. The central figure is then able to stage and project her theatricalised self into the imagined and real public realms that accompany this new selfhood. This allows the protagonist to observe the effects of her new visibility upon her own and others' views of herself. The hat therefore provokes a re-visioning of the central figure's appearance and visibility, and enables the protagonist to re-vision her understanding of the 'value' of her appearance. She may also begin to realise how her re-visioned self has been re-located within specular society, for she is now able to see herself as (an)other: "je me vois comme une autre, comme une autre serait vue" (LA 20).

The protagonist's ability to attract the gaze can largely be attributed to her incongruous combination of clothing: there is indeed something "d'insolite, d'inouï [...] dans la tenue de la petite" (LA 19). The masculine quality of the hat is contrasted with the protagonist's make-up (LA 24), the worn-out but feminine dress, her brother's belt (LA 18), and the golden-coloured high-

heeled shoes (LA 18-19). These are shown in turn against the young, almost androgynous "corps chétif" (LA 20) of the adolescent[8]. The final image is strange, yet striking, as these contradictions create intrigue about the protagonist's identity. The arresting nature of the image is such that when it later reappears in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, it has become reconceptualised as a sort of legend. Indeed, it seems so familiar that we can almost believe that we did indeed encounter it in all four texts:

> [...] elle est fardée, habillée comme *la jeune fille des livres*: de la robe en soie indigène d'un blanc jauni, du chapeau d'homme d'«enfance et d'innocence», [...] en feutre-souple-couleur-bois-de-rose-avec-large-ruban-noir, de ces souliers de bal, très usés, [...] en-lamé-noir-s'il-vous-plaît, avec motifs de strass. [...] Elle, elle est [...] petite, maigre, difficile à attraper le sens [...]. (ACN 35-36, emphasis added)

The image of *L'Amant* is also characterised by a lack of definitive meaning. Yet it is instead an "ambiguïté déterminante" (LA 19), a sense of meaningful openness on the surface of the central figure's image. This is achieved in two ways. Firstly, the protagonist's body has yet to reach physical maturity, and as such, has not yet assumed its final form. Next, the central figure's clothes are presented as fragments, and are themselves open to the possibility of change according to the will of the narrator. As such, even physical identity is shown to be in the process of evolution. The protagonist is therefore potentially able to assume any identity, physical or psychological: there is never a single, static truth of the self.

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[8] In 'Photography and Fetishism in *L'Amant*', Alex Hughes interestingly discusses the "fetishistic, phallicized/izable quality" of these items of clothing, and of the photographic image itself. See Hughes, 2003.

As we have discussed, the transformation caused by the protagonist's hat affects both her own view of herself and the view that others have of her. The reader is not immune to such consequences, for the 'openness' of the central character's physical self invites us to re-vision our understanding of the nature of image. In particular, we are reminded that the meaning and 'value' we ascribe to an image is created through our culture. This primarily occurs as a result of the juxtaposition of strongly masculine and feminine clothing, as this contradictory use of conventional gender 'indicators' is highly unexpected. Judith Butler's explanation of gender identity is particularly apt in this case: "Consider gender [....] as a[n] 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where *'performative'* suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler, 1999, 177). This construction, and the resulting self-image, seem particularly dramatic here, as the 'blank' physical base of the protagonist's adolescent's body forms a contrasting base which lends itself easily to being masked by conventional material markers of both genders. However, its fundamental neutrality means that it is ultimately appropriated to neither. As a result, the predicted gender boundary is blurred, destabilising our expectations of the reading surface of the protagonist's physical body. Conventional gender markers (clothes, make-up, footwear), and indeed the body itself, are therefore shown to have no inherent meaning. Instead, it is demonstrated that the meaning of these markers is assigned by society. A combination of these 'meaningful' elements may produce the impression of a stable social and gender identity, but this identity is in fact based in artifice. In addition, it could be suggested that the protagonist's refusal to ascribe to one particular set of gender 'indicators', and therefore to conform to expected gender identity, hints at a wider opposition

to socially imposed norms of behaviour. This is most obviously expressed by the protagonist's decision to continue her relationship with the lover despite its social unacceptability.

In buying the "chapeau d'homme" (LA 19) for her daughter, the protagonist's mother insidiously suggests that image manipulation, and therefore its consequences are acceptable. This in turn contributes to the central character's realisation that the role of visual object is open to her. The mother also overtly encourages the protagonist to recognise the link between visual objectification and financial reward, and to model her image and behaviour accordingly:

> [L]a mère permet à son enfant de sortir dans cette tenue d'enfant prostituée. Et c'est pour cela aussi que l'enfant sait bien y faire déjà, pour detourner l'attention qu'on lui porte à elle vers celle que, elle, elle porte à l'argent. Ça fait sourire la mère. (LA 33)

The mother's encouragement of image manipulation is also evident in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma.* For instance, she accepts the 'gifts' received from the lover figure in return for his visual objectification of her daughter. When she finds that the first diamond she receives will not raise the money she hoped for, she boldly asks the protagonist to accept visual objectification once more, in order to obtain a second diamond:

> Elle ne parla de ce *projet* qu'à Suzanne seule [...]. Il fallait être *habile,* revoir M. Jo sans lui faire soupçonner qu'on l'avait recherché, et reprendre avec lui les relations anciennes. Prendre son temps. Les renouer, ces relations, à s'y tromper et jusqu'à provoquer de nouveau

> en lui un désir *rénumérateur*. L'essential, c'était ça [...], d'obscurcir sa raison au point qu'il en revienne, de nouveau désésperé, à lui abandonner les deux autres diamants ou même un seul. (BCP 167, emphasis added)

Her plan, fundamentally equal to extortion, is clearly defined. It is evident that she sees the relationship between M. Jo and her daughter not as an affair but as a financial project. Her desire for profit is such that she is essentially willing to exploit her daughter's visual 'value', using her as a pawn to awaken the "désir rénumérateur" (BCP 167) that will yield another diamond. Manipulation of the central self's image can therefore also be used to manipulate the behaviour of other characters as desired. Yet the mother also encourages her daughter to accept visual objectification in a more subtle way by sanctioning image manipulation with her own gaze: "toujours couvé du regard par la mère, M. Jo apprenait à Suzanne l'art de se vernir les ongles" (BCP 91).

However, the mother figure recognises that society will almost certainly disapprove of the behaviour she promotes in her daughter. This is a real concern, for "[l]a chose se sait très vite dans le poste de Sadec. Rien que cette tenue dirait le déshonneur." (LA 108-109). This conflict between the behaviour that the family feels is necessary, and that which society deems to be 'correct', often means that the mother reacts angrily when her daughter proves to be 'too' successful at attracting the male gaze. At these times, the protagonist's increased visibility could make her socially unacceptable behaviour even more apparent to others. Consequently, her mother's reaction is unforgiving: "elle m'enferme dans la chambre, elle me bat à coups de poing, elle me gifle

[...] elle sent mon corps, mon linge, elle dit qu'elle trouve le parfum de l'homme chinois, [...] et elle hurle, la ville à l'entendre, que sa fille est une prostituée" (LA 73).

Further ambivalence is apparent when outsiders question the mother's attitude to the manipulation of her daughter's image. During the mother's meeting with the *directrice* of the protagonist's school, the extraordinary behaviour of mother and daughter is juxtaposed with the more conventional expectations of the school. The resulting disparity highlights the dysfunctional nature of the family's existence as the world of public and regulated normality collides with their private chaos. The mother figure must therefore find justification for her encouragement of the manipulation of her daughter's image and behaviour:

> Ma mère a dit à la directrice de la pension: ça ne fait rien, tout ça c'est sans importance, vous avez vu? ces petites robes usées, ce chapeau rose et ces souliers en or, comme cela lui va bien? [...] Tous, dit la mère, ils tournent autour d'elle, tous les hommes du poste, mariés ou non, ils tournent autour de ça, ils veulent de cette petite, de cette chose-là, pas tellement définie encore, regardez, encore une enfant. [...] / La mère parle, parle. Elle parle de la prostitution éclatante et elle rit, du scandale, de cette pitrerie, de ce chapeau déplacé [...] et elle rit de cette chose irrésistible ici dans les colonies française, je parle, dit-elle, de cette peau de blanche, de cette jeune enfant qui était jusque-là cachée dans les postes de brousse et qui tout à coup arrive au grand jour et se commet dans la ville au su et à la vue de tous, [...] et elle pleure. (LA 112-113)

Here, it seems as the mother's assurances - "[l]a mère parle, parle. Elle parle de [...]" (LA 113) – are an attempt not only to persuade the *directrice*, but also herself, that she is acting in the best interests of her daughter. Her overenthusiastic, effusive speech echoes that of a child attempting to conceal a lie, and perhaps reveals that the mother's portrayal of herself as comfortable with the protagonist's behaviour is somewhat falsified. Indeed, her excuses arguably betray a certain amount of guilt. It could also be suggested that the mother is struck by self-pity at this moment, as she recognises her inability to provide a stable life for her children. Certainly, her own perceived failings are an inherent factor in the protagonist's need to be 'visually successful', and are thus an important motivation for the manipulation of the central figure's image.

As the mother figure attempts to justify her behaviour, she appears to realise the consequences of manipulating her daughter's self-image. For instance, encouraging her daughter to alter her image (or to let her image be altered) means that she is effectively hastening her child's transition into adulthood. The mother's interventions insidiously influence her daughter so that she might see herself as a visual object to be 'valued' by the gaze at a much earlier stage than would naturally have occurred. The protagonist's view of herself/her self is accordingly re-visioned: she gains an acute sense of how her body and appearance are evaluated by others, and her self-view alters as she begins to see herself in the context of others' perceived desires. This increased attractiveness to the male gaze will then potentially allow the protagonist to find material freedom, and thus become an independent young adult. Whilst this particular consequence is essentially desired, the protagonist's

independence would have an important impact upon the mother's self-image: her daughter's departure would result in the loss of one of the mother figure's most important mirrors.

We might also note that the mother figure manipulates her own image for her meeting with the *directrice*. Although her private life is in disarray, she does not forget the importance of visual worth, for her argument will be less forceful without an appropriate image to accompany it. Aware that her external appearance will be equated with a character judgement, the clothes she wears for the meeting match with standards from a more prosperous time: "sous les tropiques elle croit encore qu'il faut mettre des bas pour être la dame directrice de l'école" (LA 31-32). However, the protagonist, with her newly acquired appreciation of visual 'value', is not easily fooled. She is highly critical of her mother's attempts to present herself as 'normal', scornfully dismissing her mother's behaviour as naivety: "avec [...] ses robes lamentables, difformes, reprisées par Dô, elle vient encore tout droit de sa ferme picarde peuplée de cousines [...], elle me fait honte" (LA 32)[9]. The central figure's response is perhaps reasonable: it seems that in the mother's efforts to present an image that society will deem 'valuable', she in fact betrays her true 'worth'.

The central figure proves ambivalent in her response to the mother's role in image manipulation. As the protagonist is positioned at a low level in the

[9] We might note that the protagonist's response to her mother's appearance ("Elle me fait honte [...] elle est à fermer, à battre, à tuer" (LA 32)) very much echoes how her mother reacts to her daughter as a result of her appearance. However, the protagonist is depicted as more indulgent of the mother's lack of visual 'worth' in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*: "[...] elle avait pleuré sur cette mère dont elle avait honte. Son amour" (ACN 124)

textual hierarchy of power, her behaviour is greatly influenced by considerations for others. She is subconsciously aware of the psychological conflict that would result from displeasing her mother, and this is in turn reinforced at a higher level by the need to avoid jeopardising her mother's fragile state of health. Complying with her mother's wishes would therefore seem to be the most viable option. It would avoid any prospective short-term problems, such as endangering the mother's health, yet still enable the protagonist to find independence later, as her manipulated image would attract the male gaze and thus be materially rewarded. Accordingly, the protagonist becomes highly attentive to her mother's desires. She is able to guess her mother's instructions, even when these remain unspoken: "J'ai compris le regard de ma mère. J'ai souri au planteur du Nord" (EC 43). Again, the mother's gaze proves so powerful that it can control the protagonist's actions and alter her appearance without the need for verbal or physical reinforcement. The protagonist once more carries out manipulation of her own image simply by complying with behaviour dictated by another.

Following the mother's commands, regardless of their form, is advantageous in that it allows the protagonist to please two audiences simultaneously. For in tolerating her mother's manipulation, the protagonist assumes the role of a 'good' girl, creating the image of a dutiful daughter complying with her mother's wishes. Thus, the protagonist's obedient behaviour first satisfies her mother. In addition, her obedience would please any male admirers, who, like Barner in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, would be attracted by her conventionally feminine, submissive behaviour: "Toute ma vie j'ai cherché cette jeune Française de dix-huit ans, cet idéal. C'est un âge merveilleux, dix-huit ans, cet idéal. On peut les façonner et en faire d'adorables petits bibelots"

(BCP 196-197). The protagonist could therefore anticipate additional benefits to arise as a result of passively accepting her mother's attempts at manipulation. Indeed, the central figure's newly adopted, seemingly meek behaviour could potentially attract money, security, and familial independence.

Although the protagonist's choice to accept her mother's manipulative behaviour seems considered, the protagonist's reactions to being the object of the gaze often suggest that her decision was swayed by her mother's demands:

> Ma robe me fait mal, ma robe de putain. Mon visage me fait mal. Mon cœur. [...]
> Je vais au-devant des rires. Des regards.
> Je n'ai plus de mère. Je n'ai plus de frère: je vais tomber morte de honte.
> La mère, cette espèce de vieille putain perdue dans la ville où est-elle? (EC 109)

Here, the central figure openly links her new visibility to her mother. The aggressive language used – "vieille putain" (EC 109) – suggests that the narrator unequivocally blames her mother's actions for the discomfort she is experiencing as an object of the public gaze. Indeed, although the mother figure has not explicitly instructed the protagonist to seek out the gaze of others in this way, it is certainly a consequence of the mother's behaviour. The mother figure has given, and enabled others to give, a new image to the protagonist. This new, 'valuable' image places the protagonist into a realm where being 'seen' is unavoidable. The mother has also failed to provide

material security for the family, and so indirectly encourages her children to act in a way that could attract financial gain. These two factors mean that the protagonist's behaviour is inevitable. As a result, the central figure sees her experience as a direct consequence of her mother's behaviour.

It can be observed that the extent of the mother's manipulation markedly fluctuates from text to text. This variation largely corresponds to the mother's position within the narrative account, and to her depicted state of health. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique,* for example, the mother's influence on the transformation of her daughter's image is relatively limited, as she is ill during the family's stay in the city. During this period, the protagonist is immersed in society, and so the 'value' of the protagonist's image becomes an important focus. However, the mother's illness means that she is unable to cultivate a suitably valuable image for her daughter. As a compromise, this task falls to the hotel owner, Carmen (BCP 162; BCP 172). She provides the protagonist with clothes and make-up, and encourages her to seek out visual attention: "Carmen la coiffa, l'habilla, lui donna de l'argent. Elle lui conseilla de se promener dans la ville" (BCP 172). In this way, Carmen assumes a surrogate role in manipulating the protagonist's image, teaching the central figure to present herself in a way that will attract the male gaze. In *L'Éden Cinéma,* the mother's input remains relatively low. On this occasion, her opportunity to manipulate the protagonist's appearance is hampered by her marginalised position within the narrative. The mother is provided with limited opportunity to speak for herself, and has only restricted physical movement. This prevents her from intervening in her daughter's self-representation, other than where the narrator specifically permits the mother's manipulation to be included in her account. In contrast, the mother

figure of *L'Amant*, and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* takes a greater role in the manipulation of her daughter's image. However, as the discussion of the mother-daughter relationship appears to be increasingly open and coherent in these later texts, it is unclear whether the mother's involvement is truly increased, or simply perceived to be increased. These changing portrayals of the mother's involvement in the manipulation of the protagonist's image raise questions relating to how new perspectives on an issue can surface over the course of the four works. The emergence of new understandings, and misunderstandings, has important consequences for how we approach the texts, as we shall explore in Chapters III and IV.

Motivating factors

It often seems that a character's decision to manipulate the protagonist's appearance is not only motivated by a wish to control her image and conduct, but can also be linked to wider textual issues. For instance, the mother's desire to control her daughter's appearance could be interpreted as a transposition of her desire to experience control of her own life. When the mother figure beats the protagonist, she is able to temporarily control her daughter's behaviour. This in turn enables the mother figure to imagine power over her own existence: "En la battant, elle avait parlé des barrages, de la banque, de sa maladie, de la toiture, des leçons de piano, du cadastre, de sa vieillesse, de sa fatigue, de sa mort" (BCP 126). This illusory power is such that it seems to extend to authority over life and death: "Et si je veux la tuer? si ça me plaît de la tuer?" (BCP 127). It is not until the mother is unable to control her daughter in this manner that she fully admits that her own

troubles are beyond control. She therefore reverts to her pessimistic outlook and renounces all attempts to command her own life, for "[c]'était désormais inutile" (BCP 224).

In the case of the lover figure's manipulation of the protagonist's image, it seems that the principal motivation for manipulation is a desire to control the reflection received within the mirror relationship. As explored in Chapter I, each character's role and self-image naturally varies according to the character with whom he or she engages. As a result, each mirror relationship is always in flux, with evolving levels of power. Such characteristics are indeed evident in the relationship between the lover and the central character. However, altering the protagonist's external image means that the lover creates, and can predict, the reflected surface image that he receives from the protagonist. The mirror relationship would thus be partially stabilised, as the usually changing and temporary reflection provided by the other would become increasingly constant. Manipulation of image and behaviour can therefore provide potential security within the normally volatile interpersonal mirror relationship.

Manipulated or manipulator?

Attempts to control the protagonist's image and behaviour are surreptitiously usurped by the protagonist herself, as she is highly aware of the manipulative actions of other characters. She expresses particular pride in her ability to recognise the other's desired image of her and to change accordingly: "Ce que je veux paraître, je le parais [...], tout ce que l'on veut de moi je peux le

devenir" (LA 26). In this way, the protagonist effectively carries out her own attempts at manipulation, yet these attempts are problematic. On a superficial level, the protagonist's manipulation of her own image allows her to reclaim some ownership of her self-image. For in her own mind, her newly adopted image is "ce que je veux" (LA 26). Yet this image is also, paradoxically, "ce que l'on veut de moi" (LA 26). The central figure's own desires for self-representation thus become confused with those of others. As a result, the changes that she makes to her appearance are never objectively chosen, but are always influenced by her 'audience'.

The protagonist is therefore consciously and unconsciously influenced by outsiders when constructing her image. This is evident in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique,* when the protagonist chooses to wear her usual clothes in her older brother's presence. She recognises that he does not want to be reminded of her relationship with the lover figure, or of her growing maturity, and so she assumes her habitual image and role. When Joseph is absent, however, she can abandon her unsophisticated image, and is free to seek out the gaze of others. The protagonist therefore reverts to wearing the dress chosen by M. Jo in the hope of attracting visual attention:

> Suzanne entra dans sa chambre et sortit de l'armoire le paquet des choses que lui avait données M. Jo. Elle en retira sa plus belle robe, celle qu'elle mettait lorsqu'ils allaient à la cantine de Ram, celle qu'elle avait mise quelquefois à la ville et dont Joseph disait que c'était une robe de putain. C'était une robe bleu vif qui se voyait de loin. Suzanne avait cessé de la mettre pour que Joseph ne l'engueule pas. Mais aujourd'hui que Joseph était parti, il n'y avait plus de crainte à avoir.

> Du moment qu'il avait choisi de partir et de la laisser, elle pouvait le faire. Et en enfilant cette robe, Suzanne comprit qu'elle faisait un acte d'une grande importance, peut-être le plus important qu'elle eût fait jusqu'ici. Ses mains tremblaient. (BCP 300)

The protagonist's response to her brother's departure demonstrates how she has learnt, perhaps too well, to conform to the perceived desires of others. Although wearing this dress appears to be "un acte d'une grande importance" (BCP 300), symbolising freedom from her brother's tyrannical influence, her decision to wear it is still far from autonomous. Indeed, her choice is made with consideration for an unknown other as she hopes to attract a passer-by. The central figure is thus abandoning the image desired by her brother, only to replace it with one that will be wanted by someone else. It could therefore be argued that the protagonist's manipulation of her own image simply facilitates manipulation by others, as she participates in transforming her own appearance into that envisaged by her mirrors.

Although corresponding to the other's wishes ensures that the protagonist will always be desired, her chameleonic 'talent' fails to be the empowerment that she perceives it to be: every image that she assumes, as we have seen, is inescapably imagined for her by the other. This is evidenced in a more concrete manner by the protagonist's clothing in the imagined photograph of *L'Amant*. The 'photographed' central figure demonstrates great pride in the image that she has constructed, shamelessly demanding our attention: "Sur le bac, regardez-moi" (LA 24). However, the elements used to compositely assemble her image are nearly all inherited from others: the belt is lent from her brother, and her dress belonged to her mother (LA 18). The materials

from which she assembles her surface image are therefore not chosen freely, but are selected from a limited range previously determined by another.

Whilst the central character therefore internalises the view of others in order to produce a 'valuable' physical image, there is little evidence that her assimilation of such views alters how she perceives her situation as a woman within textual society. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma*, this seems to happen by chance. Although the protagonist of these texts understands that the visual can bring material reward, she is bewildered by her experiences when she tries to exploit this understanding in a wider context. As a result, she avoids fully assimilating many ideals of feminine behaviour. In contrast, the more mature narrative voice of *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* has a greater understanding of the visual, and is confident in both using and critiquing image. The central figure therefore adopts an image that will please her 'audience', but also recognises that society's conception of visual 'worth' has little in common with the true nature of desire:

> Je sais que ce ne sont pas les vêtements qui font les femmes plus ou moins belles, ni les soins de beauté [...]. Je sais que le problème est ailleurs. [...] Il n'y avait pas à attirer le désir. Il était dans celle qui le provoquait ou il n'existait pas. (LA 26-28)

The central figure's role as a 'critic' is crucial, as it effectively repositions the protagonist as an observer within the text: "Je regarde les femmes dans les rues de Saigon [...]. Il y en a de très belles, de très blanches [...]. Elles ne font rien, elles se gardent seulement" (LA 27). This repositioning enables the

central figure to recognise these women as collectively other to her gaze. She thus situates herself outside of their group of women, and so learns about, yet avoids adopting, their passive roles.

Despite the central figure's ability to critically evaluate how others are objectified by the gaze, we may question whether she is able to understand that manipulation of her image will lead to her own objectification. Accepting manipulation means that the protagonist occasionally assumes a malleable, doll-like quality in the eyes of others, and she is indeed treated thus by the lover figure: "il s'en recouvre le visage, la bouche, les yeux" (LA 123). This doll-like physical quality implies that the protagonist's mind is also easily pliable, or that like a marionette, she is empty-headed. Indeed, the protagonist consents to manipulation of her image and behaviour even if she does not fully understand it: "Suzanne ne saisissait pas toute la portée des paroles de Joseph mais elle les écoutait religieusement comme le chant même de la virilité et de la vérité" (BCP 266). It can therefore be suggested that the protagonist lacks the insight and maturity that would allow her to accept manipulation by others with full intentionality.

Even though the protagonist may not (or cannot) accept manipulation willingly, her altered image will nevertheless be useful in attracting money and security. In addition, it will give rise to positive consequences for her reflected self-image. The central figure's new, 'valuable' appearance will attract an increased level of visual attention, and so she will gain additional intersubjective mirrors to reflect her selfhood. These supplementary mirror reflections can be used to compensate for the inconsistency or bias of her immediate intersubjective mirrors. This is particularly advantageous in the

case of the mother figure, whose reflections are highly unreliable. For instance, despite the mother's crucial role in the creation of her daughter's selfhood, a sense of the mother's own self-representation is conspicuously absent from these texts. As self is always partially other, this absence could have potentially devastating results for the protagonist's own sense of self-image. Laurie Corbin describes these possible consequences, and explains the central figure's response:

> The impression given is that instead of representing a self to others, she [the mother] represents nothing. [...] [S]he does not even have the appearance of self that most women have. It is as though to look in her eyes is to see only emptiness and devastation, a frightening void. Since it is the possibility of being engulfed in this void which terrifies the daughter, this could also explain the daughter's insistence on her own self-representation. The more that she is seen by others (therefore validated by their gaze), the less she is in danger of taking on her mother's loss. (Corbin, 1996, 99)

However, in order to enjoy the advantages that come with her manipulated image, the protagonist must also accept the other aspects of what it means to be publicly visible. This is to say that the central figure must allow herself to exist as "sexualised merchandise" (Corbin, 1996, 102). This is an apt description of her new role: she does indeed become a manufactured, constructed product for which people will quite literally barter. She becomes a commodity, perceived as exchangeable for money (BCP 202; EC 111), a pineapple (BCP 321), or a diamond (BCP 119). As result, it can be asked whether the protagonist's decision to allow manipulation of her image and

behaviour is entirely beneficial, for in her attempt to maintain her subjecthood, she literally transforms herself into an object to be sold.

It can be argued that the protagonist's decision to manipulate her appearance, and to allow others to do so, is perhaps not really worth the cost. Indeed, it seems to achieve very little in the long term. Despite attempts to attract passers-by using her new, manipulated image, the central figure of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma* is ignored: "pas plus qu'avant les autos ne s'arrêtèrent devant cette fille à robe bleue, à robe de putain" (BCP 300). Her brother, in contrast, leaves with a woman from the city (BCP 281-286; EC 142-145), thus fulfilling Suzanne's dream of escaping the plain with an outsider. As she fails to attract attention, the protagonist remains reliant on her brother to return and provide her with an escape route from the farm: "Un paysan a demandé si on allait partir pour toujours. / Joseph m'a regardée, il a dit que oui" (EC 153). Yet even this escape is only alluded to, as their departure is never explicitly portrayed. Similarly, the conclusions of *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* show the protagonist's chosen tactic to be relatively unsuccessful. In these texts, the central figure succeeds in leaving the plain, but does so with her mother and brother. Although their departure offers an escape from their former life, it does not provide the protagonist with relief from her difficult relationship with her mother. During the family's journey, the young man's suicide is an omen that presages further trouble within the family unit (LA 136-137; ACN 234-238). This is later confirmed, as the protagonist's older brother continues to cause conflict in the family. He will be involved, for example, in wartime collaboration and theft (LA 95). However, as little information is provided relating to the protagonist's relationship with her mother after their departure from Indochina, it is

impossible to establish whether this particular outcome was ultimately positive or negative.

Finally, the act of manipulation is itself revealed as somewhat futile. Although the protagonist attempts to maintain her re-visioned appearance using clothes and make-up, she discovers that certain aspects of her image cannot be changed or disguised: "J'ai remis le chapeau d'homme au ruban noir, les souliers d'or, le rouge sombre des lèvres, la robe de soie. J'ai vieilli. Je le sais tout à coup. Il le voit" (LA 59). This lack of control over her appearance, whether due to a natural and inevitable alteration as it is here, or due to the interventions of others, parallels the protagonist's fatalistic existence. Though the central figure holds a potentially authoritative position as formaliser of the narrative, she is unable to autonomously choose her behaviour and appearance, and struggles to maintain a stable external or internal image. As a result, she becomes detached from her own story. Furthermore, the central figure is inevitably both subject and object of her own narrative. The past self is necessarily re-visioned, and thus objectified, by the writing self as part of the process of textualisation. In turn, this textualised self will be interpreted, and (re)visioned, by the reader. It is thus impossible for the central figure to have total control over how she is seen.

Risks and hazards

As we have discussed in the preceding section, the protagonist perceives a greater sense of control over her projected reflection as a result of manipulating, or allowing others to manipulate, her image. We have also

established that the protagonist learns to ignore her own desired image of herself. The original image is therefore devalued, potentially damaging the protagonist's self-view and self-esteem. We might now suggest that these factors would increase the desire to find a new, more valuable image, and thus encourage the protagonist to seek out manipulation and objectification. This behaviour is potentially risky, as the protagonist could eventually abandon her own instinctive self-view in favour of a constant consideration of the desires of others. Her already limited ability to envisage her own image and to choose her own behaviour would then be further reduced, leading to total objectification. Manipulation of the external image, even when it is voluntarily sought, can therefore have profound and negative effects upon the psychological selfhood of the character.

Manipulation can also be hazardous for those carrying it out. Whilst characters such as the lover figure and the older brother perhaps believe that they have control of the protagonist's image, she usurps their power by anticipating the image that they desire to see. Once more, the surface manifestation of the central figure's selfhood is shown to reveal little of the underlying subjectivity. Furthermore, manipulation creates many permutations of the central character, and so viewing and reading selves may find it difficult, or impossible, to locate the most accurate manifestation of the central figure. Indeed, the multiple versions of the protagonist's image provide the viewer/reader with a bewildering array of 'truths' of the central self. Our privileged position as reader means that our efforts to identity the 'real' central self are thwarted: we can see all of the possible physical and psychological permutations of the central figure, not just the form that this self takes during a momentary interaction with a given character. Our ability

to determine the 'true' manifestation of the central self is then further decreased by the very indefinability of fact in these texts: can 'truth' be classified as experiential or factual, current or past? This is an important question, and one to which we shall return in Chapters II and IV, as it may reveal how the multiple versions of the central self relate to one another, and to their autobiographical referent.

We are thus reminded of the prospect of manipulation on a higher level, in terms of how the authorial self relates the central self's depicted identity to that of its real-life counterpart. In particular, the general evolution in textual content – examples of which shall be explored in the final chapter - highlights a possible discrepancy between textualised and lived realities. This in turn suggests a manipulation of both self and story that will progressively fictionalise the central self. It can be argued that this manipulation may increase the author's sense of ownership over the events recounted, in the same way that the protagonist's manipulation of her image gives her some sense of control. Manipulation of image and content may therefore be considered a necessary tool in making public what is essentially private, but potentially disturbs the expected value of autobiographical 'truth' by confusing fact with invention. Our habitual expectation of factual accuracy in the autobiographical text is well encapsulated by Philippe Lejeune in his exploration of the "pacte référentiel" (Lejeune, 1975, 36):

> [L]a biographie et l'autobiographie sont des textes *référentiels*. [...] Leur but n'est pas la simple vraisemblance, mais la ressemblance au vrai. Non l'«effet du réel», mais l'image du réel. [...] La formule [du pacte

> référentiel] serait [...]: « Je jure de dire la vérité, toute la vérité, rien que la vérité ». (Lejeune, 1975, 36)

However, as the self of these texts exists in the form of multiple selves, it is difficult to assign this self to a single external or internal referent. The mutable nature of the basic 'facts' of the four accounts also means that conventionally-determined 'truthfulness' seems minimal. Instead, the texts might be referred to as a type of "[f]iction, d'événements et de faits [...] réels" (Doubrovsky, 1988, 69), although we shall explore other possible ways of describing Duras' work in the following chapter. It is highly important for us, the reader, to acknowledge the absence of absolute referential truth in these works, or we may risk believing that the image that we see, in one or several of these texts, is a straightforward representation of the intra-textual or extra-textual versions of the central figure.

In summary, the characters' obsession with the visual leads them to ascribe meaning and 'value' to physical appearance. Characters then re-vision the protagonist's original appearance in light of these 'values', manipulating her image accordingly. This manipulation is also carried out by the protagonist herself in response to the perceived desires of others. Yet the influence of manipulation also extends to the reader's experience of these texts. Indeed, it seems that the mutable nature of the central figure's psychological and physical self/selfhood transforms her into an (optical) illusion: identity is revealed to be kaleidoscopic, shifting according to the viewer's desires. The panoply of altered images produced by manipulation means that the central self cannot be definitively located. Instead, the idea of a singular 'truth' of the self is revealed to be a textual fiction. Nor is there any possibility of

determining which of these many manifestations of the central self corresponds most accurately to its extra-textual referent. It can therefore be said that the qualities of the visual, and of visual manipulation, play an important role in inviting us, the reader, to re-examine our preconceived notions of textual 'truth' and fiction. This topic, together with an examination of how the visual influences the very mechanics of these texts, will be explored in the following chapter.

III

Writing the Mirrored Self

In Chapters I and II, we explored how the central character is produced through a variety of mirror reflections, with particular emphasis on the role of interpersonal mirrors. Until this point, we have largely concentrated on how this method of character construction is foregrounded in textual content. However, in this chapter, it will be argued that the overarching palimpsestic structure of these autobiographical texts also demonstrates the characteristics of the mirror relationship, and embodies the composite and shifting nature of the central figure's selfhood. This facilitates the textual portrayal of the inherently intangible and inexpressible features of the reflected self, and allows a mirror relationship between writing and written selves to be established. We will also see that the characteristics of palimpsestic writing potentially oppose the reader's expectations of an 'autobiographical' text. Indeed, rewriting the autobiographical text will inevitably result in a re-visioning of the central self, but also a re-visioning of her past, as "[r]emembering produces change, [and] repetition produces difference" (Game, 1998, 345). We will therefore examine how these works could be conceptualised within literary theory in a manner that would satisfactorily reconcile their biographical and fictional aspects.

Rewriting the text, re-visioning the self

In *La Vie Matérielle,* Duras explains that "je ne connais pas mon histoire [...]. Mon histoire, elle est pulvérisée chaque jour, à chaque seconde de chaque jour, par le présent de la vie" (VM 99). The author's experience of the past is therefore not 'completed', but inescapably and openly linked to changes in the present self's viewpoint and memory. It follows, then, that the author's response to her historical counterpart also evolves in accordance with changes in her current perspective. Acknowledgement of these shifts in the mirror relationship that memory establishes between past and present selves would be difficult to accomplish within a single account, as the constant evolution of this relationship could not be recorded.

Indeed, an isolated account of the autobiographical story and its central self is arguably just a record of "ce que je pense certaines fois, certains jours, de certaines choses" (VM 9). This is to say that each text, produced at just one moment and perspective, can only express a limited truth of the past. Although an individual text may not be a deliberate manifestation of "la dalle de la pensée totalitaire, [....] définitive" (VM 9), it is inevitable that the past is somewhat fixed by the act of writing:

> Quand on commence à écrire sa vie, on sait que l'on va donner une forme définitive et un sens à tout ce qu'on avait jusque-là laissé de mouvant et d'incertain dans son passé, et que ce récit une fois écrit il sera difficile de le recomposer autrement. Aucune approche fraîche et

> directe du passé ne sera plus possible, on ne pourra plus le voir qu'à travers le récit qui en aura été fait. (Lejeune, 1971, 25)

However, if the reader has access to several texts, the evolving present viewpoint, and the resulting changes in the author's understanding of the past, can be captured over time. Duras' repeated exploration of the basic autobiographical story means that this re-visioning of the past in light of the present can be captured. This is to say that at each moment of remembering and revisiting, the author is able to identify any changes in her view of the past, and can then record any altered significances within the new autobiographical narrative. Palimpsestic writing thus allows present and past selves to be recorded at a variety of moments, reframing their relationship in response to the constantly changing affective and memorial responses of the author. As an additional consequence, the mechanisms of self-construction by mirror reflection are manifested not only within the content of individual texts, but also within the overarching textual structure: both elements demonstrate that the central self is produced in numerous forms by an amalgamation of multiple and evolving reflections. The combination of palimpsestic structure and textual content therefore allow the reader to gain a clearer understanding of the role of mirrors in the production of the central selfhood.

Whilst this is indeed a useful function, re-writing and re-visioning of the central self and her story challenges our expectations of the autobiographical aspects of these texts in three ways. Firstly, the autobiographical project is habitually thought of as a definitive project: "en principe, de même qu'un homme ne meurt qu'une fois, il n'écrit *qu'une seule* autobiographie" (Lejeune,

1971, 25). Second, it is unusual that the autobiographical project should be undertaken at a variety of moments, for as Serge Doubrovsky highlights, we generally understand the autobiography as a "privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie" (Doubrovsky, 1988, 69). Finally, Duras' re-visioning of the central self and her story means that the basic 'facts' of the text remain "mouvant" and "incertain" (Lejeune, 1975, 25). This unexpected lack of definitive meaning suggests that biographical truth is itself seemingly open to re-visioning, as the author alters her 'history' in light of new interpretations of the past. Contrary to our expectations, an "approche fraîche" (Lejeune, 1971, 25) is shown to be possible. By undermining our expectations of these texts as autobiographical, Duras invites the reader to re-examine our idea of what autobiography is, and if the past can be evaluated in a way that is not strictly defined by biographical fact.

Importantly, re-visioning and rewriting reveal that the truth of these texts does not solely belong to the writing self, but is also co-produced by past and textualised manifestations of this writing self. In short, these texts represent the co-existent reality of author, narrator and protagonist. This co-existence of a number of creative selves can be used to explain the structure of each of these texts. In *La Vie Matérielle*, Duras describes how her perception of her past experience contrasts with the neatly consequential arrangement of events in a conventional autobiography:

> Je n'ai pas d'histoire. De la même façon que je n'ai pas de vie [...] et je n'ai aucune possibilité d'apercevoir clairement ce qu'on appelle ainsi: sa vie. [...] J'ai toujours vécu comme si je n'avais aucune possibilité de m'approcher d'un modèle quelconque de l'existence. Je me demande

> sur quoi se basent les gens pour raconter leur vie. C'est vrai qu'il y a tellement de modèles de récits qui sont faits à partir de celui de la chronologie, des faits extérieurs. On prend ce modèle-là en général. On part du commencement de sa vie et sur les rails des événements, les guerres, les changements d'adresse, les mariages, on descend vers le présent. (VM 99)

This inability to impose textual logic or linearity is evident in all four of these texts. For instance, whilst *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* superficially adheres to a chronological framework, the duration of events is often extended or compressed according to the central figure's perceptions. Then, in the later texts, the sequential arrangement of events is ostensibly more disordered. The chronology of *L'Éden Cinéma* is interrupted, for example, by the use of older and younger narrators, eliding past and present. Events are also deliberately discussed before they are re-enacted, giving the impression that time is momentarily repeated. In *L'Amant*, the temporal constraints of a chronological structure are often entirely disregarded. Instead, the narrative seems to be arranged associatively. An older narrative voice interrupts the moment of action; an image of the older central self is introduced at the beginning of the text, when we would expect this self to be youngest; and events are seemingly revealed as they come to mind. Indeed, the central self agrees once more that "[l]'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas. [...] Pas de chemin, pas de ligne" (LA 14). The narrative of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* seems to return to a largely linear style, yet this linearity is broken by references to preceding texts. This has the effect of highlighting that this text has an unusual relationship to the past being recounted, for it partially results from previous reworkings. The temporality of this text is thus disrupted.

The associative nature of Duras' thematic and structural interweaving of past and present, together with a refusal to create a definitive (hi)story, is highly characteristic of autoportraiture. In the framework offered by this model of writing the self, associative writing and narrative uncertainty are advantageous rather than problematic. In *Miroirs d'encre: Rhétorique de l'autoportrait* (1980), Michel Beaujour describes associative temporality as highly beneficial for creativity and experiential truthfulness, as it allows the writer to return to previously established events and explore them further. As we have discussed, this ability to return to the past is useful for clarifying the mirror relationship between the present, writing self, and the past, textualised self. Indeed, by allowing for re-visioning of the former self, the autoportrait acknowledges that the textual self cannot be reductively defined: instead, it is always evolving in light of the remembering and writing self.

The constant interplay between past and present selves perhaps risks confusion of their viewpoints. However, there are indications that the writing self avoids attributing her own understanding of an event to the protagonist. This is important, as the young protagonist would have been unaware of the full significance of many events. This difference between past and present viewpoints is often clearly demarcated within the narrative: "C'est le commencement de l'histoire. / L'enfant est encore sans le savoir" (ACN 61). The risk of confusing past and present significances is particularly high at the moment of writing, for it is at this time that the past is woven into a meaningful narrative. The artificiality of the transformation of experience into narrative is acknowledged by Serge Doubrovsky: "Le sens d'une vie n'existe nulle part, n'existe pas [...]: il est à *construire*" (Doubrovsky, 1988, 77). For the

very reason that direction and meaning are attributed only at the moment of producing a narrative strand, current insight must be separated from previous understanding in order to capture the creative process accurately, for "[o]n n'écrit jamais quelque chose qui s'est produit avant, mais ce qui se passe au moment de l'écriture" (Duras, in Armel, 1990, 29). Past events are therefore presented as if being lived and interpreted for the first time at each moment of remembering and re-writing. As a result, each text reveals a fresh perspective on the past, surprising even the author: "En écrivant *L'Amant* j'avais le sentiment de *découvrir*" (VM 34).

We might expect these multiple perspectives to give us a clearer overall picture of the central self and her story. However, the varying interpretations offered at each moment of authorial re-visioning, together with non-linearity and lack of causality in the resulting accounts, mean that it is difficult to reconstruct a coherent version of this past and self. A straightforwardly autobiographical account of the central self's life is seemingly unattainable: "L'histoire de votre vie, de ma vie, elles n'existent pas [...]. Le roman de ma vie, de nos vies, oui, mais pas l'histoire" (Duras, in Armel, 1990, 131). This suggestion that life can only be textualised as a "roman" implies that strict biographical fact is a complete impossibility: instead, the past can only exist as it was experienced. In addition, the process of textualisation means that history inevitably becomes story, as the past is necessarily filtered by the writing subjectivity. It can also be suggested that the resulting 'past' loses further historic authority as a result of being placed into a narrative, as fiction becomes the value against which fact is measured: "Reality, i.e. *remembered* reality, is being reconstructed by and through fiction. It is fiction that is the

main and first 'référent', and not reality, the latter being established, proved, reinforced by fiction" (Game, 1998, 346).

Theatrical (hi)stories of the self

It could be proposed that the apparent fictionalisation of the autobiographical story is a natural consequence of Duras' chosen textual style, as Philippe Gasparini explains: "puisqu'il n'y a pas de littérature narrative que fictionnelle, tout récit qui semble littéraire semble fictionnelle" (Gasparini, 1994, 144). Indeed, the narrative form characterises all of these texts, yet appears under the guise of several textual genres[10]. This variety of genres potentially exacerbates the confusion of biographical truth and fiction, as re-presenting the account as narrative, play and screenplay causes the autobiographical story to take on an almost theatrical aspect. The changing forms of the texts seem to constitute a repeatedly redressed stage, onto which self and (hi)story can be re-staged and re-enacted according to the will of the author-director. The more times this takes place, the more impossible it becomes to divorce biographical truth from fiction, and so these texts resist being read as conventionally autobiographical. Yet this narrative re-performance is useful in our understanding of mirror relationships within texts. Textual re-performance echoes the protagonist's re-projection of her own theatricalised self-image, whilst our struggle to distinguish narrative fact and fiction mirrors the difficulties that characters encounter in discerning the

[10] Although *L'Éden Cinéma* is written for theatrical performance, I would also argue that it is based in narrative. This is because events are mainly retold by the multiple narrative voices of Suzanne and her brother, rather than re-enacted: it is "du théâtre lu, pas joué" (VM 17).

protagonist's true self from her physical image. Finally, this self-conscious restaging of the narrative also means that the reader is made aware that these autobiographical accounts are written with an 'audience' in mind, just as the protagonist considers her own 'spectators' when constructing her image.

Theatricalisation of the autobiographical story is also evident within individual texts. For instance, the author-narrator of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* asserts that "je suis redevenue un écrivain de romans" (ACN 12). This would naturally lead us to conclude that this text is novelistic in form, yet Duras also presents this work as being a film scenario. This confusion is deliberately underlined within the narrative itself: "C'est un livre. / C'est un film. / C'est la nuit" (ACN 17). It plunges us, the reader, into our own metaphorical darkness about whether we should expect to find truth or fiction in this and all preceding texts. For if this final text is indeed a novel, then the classification of the previous texts may also shift towards the fictional. This is especially confusing given Duras' presentation of *L'Amant:* "C'est la première fois que je n'écris pas une fiction. Tous mes autres livres sont des fictions" (Duras/Pivot, 1984). Each individual text, when considered in the context of the other works, therefore has the ability to alter our previously established interpretations. As a consequence, textual events, and the texts themselves, risk being caught in a cyclical "« fictionalisation » du factuel et « factualisation » du fictif" (Darrieusecq, 1996, 378).

Our inability to judge these texts as unambiguous truth or fiction means that they cannot be conceptualised within any one theory of writing the self. Instead, external and internal truths are blended, presenting the reader with a "fausse fiction, qui est histoire d'une vraie vie [...]. Ni autobiographie ni

roman, donc, au sens strict, il fonctionne dans l'entre-deux, en un lieu impossible et insaisissable ailleurs que dans l'opération du texte" (Doubrovsky, 1988, 70). Accordingly, the reader is invited to read in this in-between space, interpreting the content of these works in light of the process of textualisation. Rather than seeking to measure textual 'truth' against external, factual referents, 'facts' can be placed into and understood within the textual sphere. Yet this does not entirely resolve the conflict between history and story, as we cannot help but remain aware that these texts do have some biographical, external referents: there once was a woman called Marguerite Donnadieu (who later took the pseudonym Duras), who did live in French Indochina, and so on. The resulting breach between lived reality and textual representation underscores the difficulty of authentically writing the self, as this disparity acknowledges "the ambiguous relationship between the author as writer and the author as character, between the aleatory chronology of a life and the necessarily formalized, insufficient and falsifying account of this" (Waters, 2000, 125).

The conflict between textual and lived realities, whilst disconcerting to the reader searching for a straightforwardly autobiographical account, usefully highlights the author's creative role in the production of the textual sphere. This has several interesting consequences. Firstly, we are reminded that the selfhood and history of Duras, the writing figure, do not neatly correspond to those of her textualised counterpart. In turn, this demonstrates to the reader the ease with which it is possible to interpret superficial, surface image as a perfectly accurate manifestation of the underlying consciousness, an error that characters often commit. Secondly, the disparity between writing and written selves serves as a reminder that the self can exist in many different

permutations, and that each version becomes visible according to the viewer, and how or when it is observed. In *La Vie Matérielle,* Duras herself touches upon some of these potential incarnations of the central figure: "Il y a donc deux petites filles et moi dans ma vie. Celle du *Barrage.* Celle de *L'Amant.* Et celle des photographies de famille" (VM 100). However, the reader is able to identify the central figure in many other forms: there is at once Duras, the private self; the publicly known writer; the reader; the agent of memory; the narrator; the protagonist. These permutations of the central self may be subsequently manipulated during the process of re-visioning, re-writing and (re)reading, or within individual texts, as we have seen.

Duras' texts therefore shy away from the conventional function of autobiographical writing, "de fixer, de donner solidité" (Lejeune, 1971, 64). It could even be proposed that Duras' creation of plural selves and plural (hi)stories, both of which are transforming and transformable, is an act of concealment on the part of the writer. Using the example of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* in relation to *L'Amant,* Martin Crowley suggests that rewriting can even be an act of authorial erasure:

> This is autobiography as self-*effacement*: in the drive to supply the truer truth about the earlier work ([ACN] 11), the self removes herself (as 'je') from her story, which therefore becomes a novel ([ACN] 12) [...]. The self is both displaced and affirmed, as the text glories its authorial return ('Je suis redevenue un écrivain de romans' ([ACN] 12)) and erases the figure with which this self had achieved such successful public circulation precisely as an author. (Crowley, 2000, 261)

This attempt to 'erase' her former self perhaps implies a rejection of the public persona created following *L'Amant*'s success, in the same way that the protagonist attempts to refuse the image that others desire for her. Furthermore, by demonstrating that "the position of successful autobiographical writing self is clearly open to subsequent challenge" (Crowley, 2000, 262), the seeming invincibility of authorial power is destroyed. As a result, the author's importance within the textual sphere that she shares with the narrator and protagonist is shown to be no greater than that of her other permutations: these texts are equally the (hi)stories of both past and present selves.

Writing self as written self

Michel Beaujour writes that "[i]l n'y a pas d'autoportrait qui ne soit celui d'un écrivain en tant qu'écrivain" (Beaujour, 1980, 15), and indeed, these works openly and extensively explore the process of writing the self. The unusual technique of reworking the autobiographical story means that the creative act of writing is foregrounded as a necessary component of the past, textual self. This is crucial, as Duras explains that writing is a central component of her own self-view: "L'écriture, c'est moi. Donc moi, c'est le livre" (Duras, in Cohen, 1993, 89). However, in addition to being Duras' means of self-definition in her current life (she is, after all, an author), writing is also her means of giving textual existence to her past self. The author's experience of the writing process must therefore be textually portrayed if her mirror reflection to her past self is to remain undistorted. For this reason, Duras seems to deliberately centre the texts around writing and the writing experience, so that "le seul sujet du livre c'est l'écriture" (Duras, in Cohen, 1993, 89).

The texts express Duras' personal reactions to the writing process by embodying the experience of writing in both content and structure. The author uses, for instance, the mechanics of the texts to demonstrate the difficulties she faces when writing. Her perception of these problems is eloquently described in *La Vie Matérielle*:

> L'écrit est déjà là dans la nuit. Écrire serait à l'extérieur de soi dans une confusion des temps: entre écrire et avoir écrit, entre avoir écrit et

> devoir écrire encore, entre savoir et ignorer ce qu'il en est, partir du sens plein, en être submergé et arriver jusqu'au non-sens. (VM 33)

This idea of bewilderment is unmistakably embodied in the texts, as simplistic, 'clean' works give way to a manipulation of events, characters, and a literal "confusion des temps" (VM 33). If it is indeed true that "[l]'autoportraitiste [...] n'est rien d'autre que son texte" (Beaujour, 1980, 348), then the self here has been astutely captured: both present and past selves are shown as inherently connected, constantly re-produced by and through writing. Writing is thus shown to be integral to the written self and its (hi)story, as though "le sujet du texte – la vie de Duras – et le sujet textualisé – un « je » écrivant – se confondent" (Murphy, 2000, 110).

This acknowledgement of the author's involvement in the process of self-textualisation is also a crucial element in theories of autofiction: "L'autofiction, en se situant entre deux pratiques d'écriture à la fois pragmatiquement contraires et syntaxiquement indiscernables, met en cause toute une pratique de lecture, *[et] repose la question de la présence de l'auteur dans le livre*" (Darrieusecq, 1996, 379, emphasis added). Indeed, the blend of biographical fact and narrative fiction, together with the clear demonstration of how the textual self is produced through writing, means that these texts perhaps become a "deconstruction of the autobiographical project" (Corbin, 1996, 74). Indeed, exposing the mechanisms which produce the textual self arguably reveals the artifice of the conventional, 'truthful' autobiographical project. For instance, the conventional dichotomous proposal that "une identité est, ou n'est pas" (Lejeune, 1975, 15) is challenged in these texts by the use of a plural, fragmented, and multi-layered central self that is shown to be in a constant

process of (re)construction. Similarly, the usually linear and single-stranded narrative of the conventional "récit très consciemment dirigé" (Lejeune, 1971, 64) is replaced by a textual "autoroute en question, qui aurait dû aller partout en même temps" (VM 16).

These texts therefore demonstrate that an alternative kind of autobiographical truth and coherency is not only possible, but valuable in attempts to write the reflected self. Artificiality is also acknowledged to be inherent and necessary when writing the self and its story:

> [The] self [...] ultimately cannot be fixed, seized, rendered captive or named in words or images. Paradoxically, then, it is through a certain artifice [...] that the writer is able to evoke a composite portrait of herself, one that in its complex facets of event and illusion begins to attain the fullness of authenticity. (Morgan, 1989, 278)

This is not to suggest that the palimpsestic, experiential mode of writing is able to achieve a more successful portrayal of the central self than conventional autobiographical writing, where the structure of the account typically relies on biographical fact. Neither is it proposed that the purely experiential aspects of the central self's existence – aspects which we might describe as biographical fact as it was lived, and is lived, at past and present moments - are more valuable than the biographical fact on which they are built. Nor are they any more able to function alone as a foundation for this alternative 'autobiographical' story. Instead, biographical and experiential realities are shown to be equally vital to re-visioning within the author-protagonist mirror relationship. Yet to ignore the difficulties in expressing

these realities, the artificiality of writing the self, or the often contradictory nature of 'factual' and experienced realities, would be to ignore a crucial part of the remembering/writing self's experience. It is perhaps for this reason that the form and content of these texts overtly express the more 'difficult' characteristics of their being, and that any limits in their ability to express lived reality are often made apparent. We might therefore say that such 'problems' must be included within the texts if the *complete* truth of the autobiographical project to be conveyed.

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated that re-visioning and re-writing leads to the production of texts that inherently demonstrate the qualities of the reflected self and of the mirror relationship. Re-writing firstly allows the central selfhood of the texts to be shown in constant evolution, as re-visioning alters the portrayal of the protagonist in accordance with the writer's changing self-view. This establishes a mirror relationship between writing and written selves, and between past and present. As a result, a 'personal past' is produced, fusing biographical fact with past and present experience, including the experience of writing. These elements are all embodied within the workings of the texts, so that the methods of self-construction and self-textualisation are themselves demonstrated. Re-visioning and re-writing therefore expose the difficulty of capturing the mirrored self in writing, and this, as we have seen, may potentially undermine the narrative authority of these texts. Each account is unable to provide a definitive 'truth' of the central self and her story, and any established 'truth' may then be overturned by later retellings: each text is simply a "[l]ivre parmi les livres" (Beaujour, 1980, 13). In addition, the experiential 'truth' that they contain cannot be easily measured against an external referent. The resulting indistinguishable blend

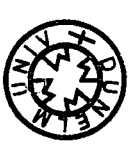
of history and story reflects the indistinct boundaries between past and present selves, and between self and other, revealing once more the astuteness of using palimpsest to express the workings of the mirror relationship. In the next chapter, we will examine how the palimpsest results in the production of a new point of interaction for the reader via the intertextual mirror.

IV
Intertextual mirrors: meaning in the 'in-between'

In Chapter III, we saw that re-writing often results in authorial reinterpretation of previous narrative 'facts'. In this chapter, we will examine how such reinterpretations create meaningful reflections between texts, as narrative re-visioning invites the reader to compare and contrast the various accounts of the basic autobiographical story. Each retelling simultaneously produces meaning whilst replicating and distorting the remaining accounts. These characteristics suggest that texts can be described as mirrors, with reflections created in the space between each text. Accordingly, this chapter will begin with a short exploration of the concept of intertextuality, followed by several examples of how evolving textual elements can function as intertextual mirrors. Finally, we will address the effects of using texts in this way, focusing upon the potentially problematic consequences of intertextual reflections for the central self and her (hi)story, for autobiographical authority, and for the reading self.

Intertextual reflections

Prior to an exploration of the intertextual mirror in Duras' autobiographical works, the use of the term 'intertext' within this context must first be defined. The definition which is most appropriate to this project is that of Julia Kristeva, explored in a chapter from the 1969 work *Séméiotiké* entitled 'Le mot, le dialogue et le roman' (Kristeva, 1969, 143-173). Derived from Bahktin's theories of dialogism, Kristeva's model of intertext proposes that the text does



not constitute a closed system of meaning in itself, but is situated within a larger structural framework of previously written texts. This can be compared to the way in which individual signifiers are located within a network of other signifiers according to Structuralist theories of language. It is a signifier's relationship to other signifiers within this network that produces meaning. We have already seen in Chapter I how this works on an intratextual basis in the example of the imagined photograph of *L'Amant*: the meaning and value of this photograph clearly arises from its positioning within a network of other, 'real' photographs.

In the same way, it can be argued that texts can be positioned and considered in relation to other textual references to create meaning on an intertextual level. Indeed, such meaning production is inevitable, for "tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte" (Kristeva, 1969, 146). Production of textual meaning is therefore always heavily dependent on previously written texts, as Roland Barthes, echoing Kristeva, suggests:

> Nous savons maintenant qu'un texte n'est pas fait d'une ligne de mots, dégageant un sens unique, [...] mais un espace à dimensions multiples, où se marient et se contestent des écritures variées, dont aucune n'est originelle: le texte est un tissu de citations, issues des mille foyers de la culture. (Barthes, 1984, 65)[11]

[11] It is particularly interesting in the case of Duras' work to consider the roots of intertextual meaning as "issues des mille foyers de la culture" (Barthes, 1984, 65) given Duras' own varied use of media, including theatre, film, radio, recorded interview, and text. Each form influences others to the point where distinctions are blurred: "Je ne sais rien de la différence entre lire et écrire, entre lire et voir [...]. Je n'aperçois plus rien de différent entre le théâtre et le cinéma, entre lire et voir". (Duras, in Game, 1998, 351). Across these genres, a certain amount of self-citation is evident, as characters and themes often

It is important to remember that this "tissu" (Barthes, 1964, 65) is not a static entity. Structuralist theories of language stress that meaning production is a constant process, with the relationship between signifiers always shifting. The same is also true for intertextual referents, as their meaning is not inherent, but formed and located in the space 'in-between' texts. This affords a rich potential for meaning production, as Kristeva explains:

> [C]ontent is to be understood not as being about a single content – 'What does this mean in the sentence?' – but as a content that may be dispersed, traceable to different points of origin; the final meaning of this content will be neither the original source nor any one of the possible meanings taken on in the text, but will be, rather, a continuous movement back and forth in the space between the origin and all the possible connotative meanings. (Kristeva/Waller, 1996, 191)

However, a full awareness of all "possible connotative meanings" (Kristeva/Waller, 1996, 191), and therefore of all potential intertextual meaning, would depend upon the existence of what could almost be described as an 'ideal' reader. Realistically, a reader would only be aware of a small number of these external, intertextual references, or, as Roland Barthes terms them, "citations sans guillemets" (Barthes, 1984, 73).

The reader is indeed crucial for the functioning of the intertextual mirror, as the transformation from an intratextual to an intertextual level of meaning depends upon the interpretative involvement of an extra-textual 'other'. It is

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resurface in several works and in various media. This suggests clearly defined intertextual links as proposed by Barthes within Duras' entire corpus.

only at this point of reading that the meaning present in the spaces 'in-between' the texts can be produced:

> [...] il y a un lieu où cette multiplicité se rassemble, et ce lieu, ce n'est pas l'auteur [...], c'est le lecteur: le lecteur est l'espace même où s'inscrivent, sans qu'aucune ne se perde, toutes les citations dont est faite une écriture; l'unité d'un texte n'est pas dans son origine, mais dans sa destination" (Barthes, 1984, 66)

Intertextual mirrors thus constitute yet another opportunity for the reader to engage meaningfully with the text. As such, the intertextual mirror forms a bridge between the reader, texts and ultimately, the author, "en les liant [...] dans une même pratique signifiante" (Barthes, 1984, 75). By contributing to the creation of the intertextual mirror, the reader closes the circuit of meaning production. This is a role which will be re-explored later in this chapter.

Contradiction and harmony: the foundation of intertextual mirrors

It can be argued that the ostensible links between Duras' autobiographical texts go some way in eliminating the need for an 'ideal' reader, as many of the more immediate intertextual similarities and differences are obvious even at first reading. In this section, we will briefly summarise various types of textual variation, and how the reflections that they provide produce meaning 'in-between' texts.

The first type of intertextual mirror can be defined as repeated elements, such as events or dialogue, which are present in all four texts. Despite the apparent existence of a basic autobiographical story, elements which reappear tend to assume several permutations, and there are in fact very few elements which consistently reappear in the same form. An example of this type of intertextual mirror includes the protagonist's first meeting with the character of the lover. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma,* the meeting is located at the *cantine* at R(é)am (BCP 37; EC 41), but is later re-located to the site of the river crossing in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (LA 25; ACN 35). The 'original' accounts of this event, as recorded in the 'Cahier rose marbré' of *Cahiers de la Guerre,* are equally contradictory. The meeting is first described as occurring at the site of the river crossing (CG 31). However, an early draft of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* then depicts the meeting as taking place at R(é)am (CG 149). As these notebooks were "jamais destiné à être publié" (Adler, 1998, 85), we might assume that they were created without an audience in mind. As a result, we might expect them to contain a consistent, un-manipulated 'truth' of the event: there is no need to entertain a readership. However, we are instead presented with contradictory versions of the same event. This suggests that these accounts were written with an awareness that they would later be used, perhaps in a changed or extended form, in texts that would be publicly read. This private 'rehearsal' for a later audience echoes the story-telling behaviour of the central figure of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* who practices her accounts without a listener: "Ça fait rien que tu n'écoutes pas. Tu peux même dormir. Raconter cette histoire c'est pour moi plus tard l'écrire" (ACN 101). The author's 'rehearsal' of the autobiographical account, together with alterations to the basic story, evokes the theatricality and malleability of Duras' autobiographical 'truth'. As this type of subverted

repetition of textual elements is so prevalent, we will return to the meeting of the central character and the lover figure in a later section, in order to explore the consequences of Duras' use of 'same-but-different' content.

Secondly, intertextual mirrors can include elements which are inconsistently repeated, that is to say, that are not present in all texts. Elements which constitute this type of intertextual mirror can be much more easily located than those which appear in all texts. Once again, the contradictions produced by such dramatic narrative variations demonstrate the flexibility with which autobiographical history is translated into personal story. An example could include the family's stay in the city. Although, as explored in Chapter I and II, this visit represents a seemingly crucial stage in the central character's transition into adulthood by increasing her awareness of the gaze, the episode is only present in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma* (BCP 155-227; EC 101-124). This could possibly be explained by changes in narrative priority, as *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* concentrate more closely on the central character's development in relation to the lover figure, rather than on her position in society. Characters also prove to be as dispensable as events. For instance, Agosti, the young man from the plantation, and Barner, the rich foreigner from the city, are only present in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma.* Their exclusion from the later texts can also be accounted for by the shift in narrative focus from public to private spheres. This type of intertextual mirror therefore emphasises the importance of the author's perception of the events retold. A further example of this kind of intertextual mirror, and the reasons for and consequences of repeating events or using characters in an inconsistent manner, will be explored below.

It can also be argued that paratext is used as an intertextual mirror. Prefaces and postscripts are particularly useful in directing us towards a more factual or fictional reading of the text concerned. This represents a change in intertextual meaning, which may in turn affect our readings of other texts. Paratext can therefore link author, text and reader, demonstrating the ability that each has to create meaning, and showing how textual interpretation can alter the reading experience. For instance, the preface of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* has an important role in changing our reading of this and other versions of the autobiographical (hi)story: "J'ai écrit l'histoire de l'amant de la Chine du Nord et de l'enfant: elle n'était pas encore là dans *L'Amant* [...]. [...] Je suis redevenue un écrivain de romans" (ACN 11-12). This statement is highly problematic: if this text contains the story of the lover and the central figure, what was the subject of the preceding texts? The apparent classification of this text as novelistic also means that it becomes difficult to understand how we ought to classify the previous texts, which also seemed novelistic. We are also led to question how 'factual' this account can be, for, as we have discussed in Chapter III, 'roman' unavoidably implies fiction. As a result, we are reminded that no single account of this autobiographical story can accurately express pure biographical 'fact', but only this 'fact' as it is experienced by the central self, and that truth and fiction are not dichotomous concepts, but (co-)located on a spectrum. Paratext also often indicates reasons for including or excluding content, such as in the explanation proffered in the postscript of *L'Éden Cinéma* for the inclusion of the mother's supposedly unedited letter: "Si inadmissible que soit cette violence, il m'est apparu plus grave de la passer sous silence que d'en mutiler la figure de la mère. Cette violence a existé pour nous, elle a bercé notre enfance" (EC 158). In this way,

paratext also reminds us of the importance of authorial priorities in influencing narrative content.

Altered representations of character can also be considered to produce intertextual meaning. Whilst some changes in character representation may result from a change in the author's attitude towards a certain figure, there are other reasons why portrayal may evolve. For example, the physical figure of the lover undergoes a marked transformation across the texts. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique,* his physical ugliness is only redeemed by his ostensible wealth, as Joseph summarises: "Merde, quelle bagnole, dit Joseph. Pour le reste, c'est un singe" (BCP 38). In *L'Éden Cinéma* and *L'Amant,* the lover figure assumes the role of a "homme élégant" (LA 42). Criticism of his appearance - "la figure n'était pas belle. Les épaules étaient étroites, les bras courts [...]" (BCP 38) - is replaced by an admiration for his material fortune. This is remarkably similar to the description of the lover figure in the 'Cahier rose marbré': "je trouvais Léon très élégant. Il avait un gros diamant au doigt et il était habillé en tussor de soie grège" (CG 31). In the supposed draft of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique,* the protagonist seems equally dazzled by the wealth of the lover figure: "Elle pensait à l'auto. Elle pensait qu'elle, Suzanne, dansait avec le propriétaire d'une pareille auto. Dans sa main droite, elle tenait la main au diamant" (CG 150). In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* the lover figure undergoes a final metamorphosis, becoming "un peu différent de celui du livre" (ACN 36). His increased physical attractiveness renders him more appealing for the gaze of the protagonist and of the spectator-reader: "Il a plus de beauté, plus de santé. Il est plus « pour le cinéma » que celui du livre" (ACN 36). Whilst this permutation of his appearance therefore makes him into a more conventional film-star figure - a character who is literally made to

be looked at - it also increases his visual 'value' within the textual sphere. In contrast, the protagonist's appearance remains relatively unchanged from its previous form, even when transformed using clothes and make-up. She describes herself, for example, as "petite et assez mal faite, criblée de tâches de rousseur" (CG 54) or "petite, maigre, hardie" (ACN 36). Descriptions provided by the mother also corroborate this portrayal: "La mère regarda sa fille et trouva qu'elle était jolie malgré ses tâches de rousseur" (CG 149; CG 54). So whilst textual changes can undermine narrative authority, the textualisation of the protagonist's physical self is thus validated in this instance. This suggests that only the writing self has the authority to inscribe that same self with any (authorially-defined) accuracy.

Finally, stylistic similarities and differences can also constitute an intertextual mirror. Although all of these texts can easily be linked to one author, *L'Éden Cinéma* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* are particularly similar in style. This resemblance perhaps results from these texts being written for theatrical and cinematic performance. The stage directions of *L'Éden Cinéma* are, for example, stylistically imitated in the short phrases of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, for instance, "Suzanne se tait. Peur de Mr Jo. / Toujours, la musique" (EC 72) "L'enfant ouvre le portail. / Le renferme. / Traverse la cour vide. / Entre dans la maison de fonction." (ACN 22). It is particularly interesting that the reader is more explicitly involved in the 'stage directions' of the later text: "*On* la perd de vue. / *On* reste dans la cour vide" (ACN 22, emphasis added). As a result, we share the viewpoint of the narrator-author (in a literal sense if viewed as a film), in the same way that the author manipulates our position within the other, more conventionally narrative texts. This highlights that *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is designed to function both when read and

performed. As a result, the reader is reminded that the basic autobiographical (hi)story can assume many permutations, and is able to alter both in terms of content and manner of retelling.

First encounters: (dis)establishing the 'story'

One particularly productive and interesting example of an intertextual mirror, as briefly touched upon in the preceding section, is the first meeting of the narrator-protagonist with the lover figure (BCP 35-39; EC 41-43; LA 11-26; ACN 35-38). In examining the evolution of the narrative account, with particular attention to mirror use and reader involvement, it is hoped that the specific mechanisms by which intertextual mirrors work to produce and embellish meaning will be demonstrated.

In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord,* the story of the meeting is recounted by a third-person narrator. This cyclical use of a third-person narrator is indicative of several factors. Firstly, it links the more conventionally novelistic mode of writing of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* with the equally romanticised (hi)story of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord.* This circularity is further emphasised by the writer's assertion that "elle [la jeune fille] est restée celle du livre" (ACN 36). This reference to a previously textualised version of the writing self suggests that the fictionalised self is as firmly established as the actual, writing self. This appears likely given that the specific text (as this self is "celle *du* livre") referred to seems to be *L'Amant.* Not only does *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* share many similarities with *L'Amant,* but the positioning of Jean-Jacques Annaud and Claude Berri's film

version of *L'Amant* between the two texts also supports this hypothesis. Duras was reputedly unhappy with the cinematic portrayal of the central self and story of *L'Amant*[12], as her vision of the film was less conventionally commercial than that which was produced. As Laure Adler summarises, "ce qui l'intéresse, elle, c'est de faire des films «maigres», sans budget, sans récit structuré" (Adler, 1998, 568). *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* therefore perhaps represents a reappropriation of this particular selfhood, as it allows the author to re-vision the cinematic self, and then 're-record' the film version for herself in a text.

Secondly, this return to writing also recalls the author's comment that she has once again become "un écrivain de romans" (ACN 12). The predominant use of a third-person narrative serves to remind us that this tale exists as a product of its own textualisation. Whilst this may seem apparent, for the past can only become text through writing, this means that the textual content itself is heavily influenced by the act of writing. This is because in the process of transforming historical content into text, authorial re-visioning must take place. As a result, the content of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, like preceding accounts, is a subjectivised approximation of the history it is based upon: re-visioned and recorded after the moment of original experience, and so the text cannot contain truth itself. This is particularly important to remember if we try to understand the authorial self via the texts, as the seemingly 'real-life' stories told there are in fact distorted by the writing process. Our ability to gain a clear picture of the author is further diminished by the creation of a defined public persona, especially after the success of *L'Amant*: the authorial

[12] See Adler, 1998, 559-563.

self is as deliberately constructed and mythicised as her textual counterpart. Whilst the reader is therefore able to gain an increased superficial knowledge of the writer figure, our ability to access her 'true' self decreases, as Duras herself recognises: "Je suis très connue, mais pas de l'intérieur. Je suis connue autour, voyez [...]" (Duras, in Duras/Gauthier, 1974, 61). Linking the first and last texts of the autobiographical palimpsest thus highlights the mutability of the autobiographical story, but also of textual and writing selves. The circularity of the link additionally suggests the existence of a relationship between all four texts, thus encouraging the reader to explore cross-textual interpretations.

The choice to name or not name the narrator-protagonist and the lover figure during this episode is also interesting. In the earlier texts, the central figure is known during this incident as Suzanne, and the lover figure as M. Jo/Mr Jo. However, in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, both are without names. M. Jo becomes *il*, *l'homme*, or *le Chinois*, while Suzanne is named simply as *elle* or *l'enfant*. It has previously been suggested that this made characters (most notably mother and daughter) reliant on one another in order to derive their own sense of self, as they are deprived of a meaningful label (as we saw in Chapter I). However, the absence of a name also has the effect of increasingly fictionalising characters that we would assume to be based upon real-life persons. Without a name, the facticity of these characters cannot be definitively checked against any actual counterpart, although assumptions may be made. This strategy is almost certainly deliberate, as Duras reveals in her 1984 'Apostrophes' interview with Bernard Pivot. She explains that the man who appears in the opening scenes of *L'Amant* was "le frère de Prévert" (Duras/Pivot, 1984). This man has a crucial role, as he

participates in a scene which essentially forms the primary textual catalyst for the whole text. He provides the narrating figure with a mirror reflection of her current self (LA 9), which in turn refracts to reveal an image of her younger self. This sets into motion the remainder of the narrative account. Yet this man remains unnamed in the text, even though he is known to the authorial figure, and introduced to the narrating voice: "un homme est venu vers moi. Il s'est fait connaître [...]" (LA 9). This withholding of known factual details may represent a further attempt to create a legend around the story of the central character and her lover, by suggesting that peripheral details such as this are unimportant. Furthermore, the use of a seemingly factual referent, without enough detail to definitively confirm its accuracy, invites the reader to continuously reconsider the importance of biographical fact within the autobiographical text. Indeed, it seems that our conventional understanding of truth is somewhat devalued by this strategy, as the unverifiable aspects of the story take on more importance than minute facts. However, withholding names also emphasises that this tale cannot ever be straightforwardly referential, as Indochina was entirely transformed within Duras' lifetime. The location of the text, and those who inhabit it, no longer exist in the form in which she first knew and experienced them. As Philippe Gasparini summarizes, this means that mythicisation is inevitable: "De la même façon que le visage de la narratrice est «détruit», cette époque est révolue, l'Indochine a disparu. Il est impossible de la reconstituer sans en faire un mythe, mythe de la jeunesse, de la beauté et de la rencontre parfaite avec l'étranger" (Gasparini, 2004, 203).

Changes in pronoun usage across the texts, the naming and un-naming of the central character and her main interpersonal mirror, and the deliberate

withholding of known names, remind the reader of the inherent emptiness of the subject pronoun. Indeed, the subject that we seemingly observe in the text is quite literally "qu'un effet de langage" (Barthes, in Myatt, 1999, 87). In an article on the 'autobiographical' works of Roland Barthes, Anna Myatt offers an explanation for the use of multiple and changing pronouns, stating that "[i]n referring to the narrator in these different ways, the trap of presenting a certain well-formed image of oneself in the text [...] is avoided - or at least the risk is attenuated" (Myatt, 1999, 89). This also holds true in the case of Duras' autobiographical works. The use of multiple pronouns and giving/removing of names arguably constitutes an effort to destabilise the potentially singular and unified written self by proving that it can never be easily contained in language. Just as rewriting of events means that the text is left open to re-interpretation, renaming leaves the self open to 're-reading' and speculation.

Changes in the depiction of the first meeting between the central character and the lover figure can also indicate something of the main thematic focus for the text. Indicating the protagonist's primary reason for showing interest in this man will in turn reveal the light in which their relationship will be depicted. For instance, in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, M. Jo's introduction focuses heavily on symbols of his financial status: "Le diamant était énorme, le costume en tussor, très bien coupé" (BCP 38). The protagonist thus appears to be more interested in his wealth than in the man himself, and this will indeed characterise their whole relationship. The mother's reaction to M. Jo also reveals the family's attitude towards the relationship, a factor which will inevitably shape subsequent events. The protagonist's mother, for example, reacts in a warm, yet calculated manner, ostensibly preoccupied by thoughts of M. Jo's wealth: "La mère dit mais comment donc je vous en prie et rougit"

(BCP 39). Knowing that this man could be extremely valuable to her and her family, she criticises her daughter for not being more "aimable" (BCP 38) in his presence. Financial aspects are also the principal reason that the protagonist of *L'Éden Cinéma* notices M. Jo. Indeed, the central figure's physical description of him begins not with his physical appearance, but with markers of his wealth: "Le diamant à la main gauche était énorme" (EC 42). The mother's reaction to their meeting is identical to that of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (EC 43; BCP 39), and it can be argued that the inclusion of the mother's response indicates that family will once more play an influential role in the relationship between the central character and the lover figure. In contrast, the monetary aspect of the meeting is downplayed in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord.* Material wealth seems secondary in the protagonist's preoccupations, and is replaced by a more general fascination with the "inconnu du bac" (ACN 142). Although it is the lover's car which first attracts the protagonist's attention (LA 25; ACN 35), financial concerns are only briefly mentioned before progressing to the next element of the narrative. The family's absence from both accounts of the meeting indicates that the protagonist's interest in the lover figure is motivated more by personal reasons than by consideration for the desires of others.

Finally, an examination of the location of this incident within each text provides an indication of how the relationship between the protagonist and the lover fits into the wider narrative. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma,* the recounting of the meeting is delayed by an exposition of the family's situation (BCP 11-34; EC 11-41). In contrast, the narrative focus of the first section of *L'Amant* centres upon the protagonist. Her first interaction

is not with a member of her family, but with the man on the boat (LA 9), suggesting from the outset that her family's role will not be foregrounded to the same extent as in previous texts. This is supported by the stylistic methods used to reveal her family background. Instead of revealing information about her family within the main narrative strand, details are introduced in temporally disruptive flashes of an alternate narrative. As a result, the protagonist's past is dislocated from the present moment of experience, meaning that its importance to the primary narrative strand is downplayed. Finally, in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the lover and the location are introduced via a self-reflexive fictionalisation: "C'est [...] [l]e bac des livres. Du fleuve. Dans le bac il y a le car pour indigènes, les longues Léon Bollée noires, les amants de la Chine du Nord qui regardent" (ACN 35). At first reading, the idea that this is the "bac des livres" seems unproblematic. Yet the ferry only appears in one other autobiographical text, *L'Amant*, and so should surely be the 'bac *du* livre'. The use of the plural for the remaining elements is more accurate: there have indeed been several permutations of the lover's car and of the lover figure himself. This slip between false and actual plural existences demonstrates the extent to which the central self and her story have become almost legendary: we are so overly familiar with the (hi)story that it indeed seems that there were many *bacs*. It could be argued that this deliberately false pluralisation is an attempt to construct a myth around the central story, a theory also proposed by Kate Ince: "This pluralisation of both text and object(s) – privileged objects of the story told in *L'Amant* and the story itself – can only be read as a mythification, an exaggerated fiction, of those objects and that story" (Ince, 2000, 115). An awareness of how this effect can be produced by subtle lexical variations – the use of a plural or singular indefinite article – reminds us of the author's

power in reconfiguring the central self. Finally, Duras' re-viewing of the space inhabited by the narrator-protagonist reminds us that characters, just like location, are open to re-interpretation. Yet it is evident that the topography of the textual self is far more unstable than that of the written landscape, due to its inherent dependence on the interpretation of the other, whether this interpretation is carried out by author, character, or reader.

After exploring the multiple presentations of this event, it can be concluded that the intertextual mirror mainly produces non-definitive meaning. This is to say that the intertextual mirror does not usually clarify a particular event, or even definitively prove that it occurred. Instead, intertextual variations, however slight, create a degree of confusion about the accuracy of textual content. The lack of authoritative meaning caused by this refusal to definitively interpret and record the past demonstrates that perceptions of an event are as important as the actual facts of the event itself. It seems, then, that memory and personal reactions have the power to alter the 'facts' of the past, so that history may be re-visioned by the agent of memory in the same way that surface appearance can be altered at will by the protagonist. Intertextual mirrors also highlight the reader's involvement in the process of meaning production, and reveal how the context of a text may colour our interpretations. This is particularly true in the case of Duras' autobiographical works, as obsessive rewriting, textual manipulation, and media successes mean that legends are seemingly created around the autobiographical story.

'Problematic' features of the intertextual mirror

We have repeatedly referred to these texts as palimpsestic in style, and this is indeed an apposite description. The term palimpsest refers to a manuscript which has been written, erased, and then written over, with the original text often remaining visible beneath. These texts certainly adopt a form which seemingly repeats and embroiders previous accounts. However, as we have seen, this textual layering is not always consistent, or does not always take a form that we would expect. In this section, we will see that scenes which appear crucial and potentially informative, and thus likely to be repeated, are in fact absent from certain narrative accounts. One such example is the scene in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Éden Cinéma* where Suzanne reveals her body to M. Jo (BCP 65-67; EC 60-62). Although the accounts of this episode provide us with much useful information, as we shall explore, this scene is omitted from *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*.

In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique,* the event is mostly recounted by a third-person narrator. The conferring of the narrative on an 'on-looking' permutation of the central self is perhaps explained by the vulnerability of the acting figure, Suzanne. Indeed, as she is unclothed, she is without an element which contributes to the performative construction of her self-image. It is only by remaining in the *cabine des bains* that she can maintain a semblance of power, remaining owner of what M. Jo wishes to see. His insistence that she should open the door - "Rien que le temps de vous voir [...]. Rien qu'une seconde" (BCP 66) - cause the protagonist of this text to realise for the first time that she is a body, if not a self, which is desired: "Suzanne se regarda bien, des pieds à la tête, regarda longuement ce que M. Jo lui demandait de

regarder à son tour. Surprise, elle se mit à sourire sans répondre" (BCP 66). Although she is ambivalent about opening the door to display her body, M. Jo uses her weakness for her brother to his advantage by promising her a gramophone which she can then give to Joseph (BCP 67). This 'prostitution' provokes Suzanne into opening the door, with the intention of spitting in M. Jo's face. It is at the moment of her decision to do so that the only use of the first-person pronoun in this passage occurs: "Je vais lui cracher à la figure" (BCP 67), as she effectively chooses to take power over the situation. At the moment of opening the door, however, the pronoun immediately reverts to 'elle' as she realises her mistake and is overcome by a lassitude which distinctly echoes her mother's general attitude: "C'était la déveine, ce M. Jo, la déveine, comme les barrages, le cheval qui crevait [...]" (BCP 67). M. Jo has won, and she has found herself powerless once more.

Although present through allusion, the brother and mother are both physically absent from the scene, as neither would sanction Suzanne's actions. By using Joseph's 'regard' as a contrast to that of M Jo (BCP 66), it is indicated to the reader that the adult, sexual gaze of the outsider represents something more significant than a simple act of looking: it is also an act of illusory ownership. Suzanne's susceptibility to manipulation, much of which has been explored in Chapter II, is indicated by the readiness with which she capitulates and opens the door to M. Jo. She feels that she is "bonne à être vue" (BCP 66) but refuses the 'price' offered for her body. However, she manifests this refusal by doing the very thing that M. Jo wants. It could be argued, however, that in showing her body defiantly, she affords it a different value to a straightforwardly passive showing. This is perhaps another reason for the switch to the first person pronoun: it embodies this strange power by

affording the protagonist a re-appropriation of narrative power. This provides an additional mirror between the narrator-author figure and the younger narrator-protagonist.

In contrast to the account of this episode in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, the character of Suzanne in *L'Éden Cinéma* is presented both in the first- and third-person, occasionally being designated as 'la fille'. The reader-viewer remains unaddressed. The circumstances under which Suzanne reveals her body to Mr Jo are changed: she does so of her own accord, without a formal request on his part (EC 60-61). This suggests that the account of this particular incident builds upon that offered in the preceding text: the protagonist does not realise her independent subjectivity in this version, as this process was already undertaken in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*. Many of the phrases used to describe the event are almost identical to those used in the previous text, differing only in style or use of pronouns. There is an evident echo, for example, between the first text's "Ce n'était pas fait pour être caché mais au contraire pour être vu et faire son chemin de par le monde, le monde auquel appartenait quand même celui-là, ce M. Jo" (BCP 66-67) and the later rewriting: "Ce que j'étais n'était pas fait pour être caché. Mais pour être vu. Pour faire son chemin dans le monde. Et Mr Jo appartenait quand même à ce monde" (EC 60). The phrases of *L'Éden Cinéma* are noticeably condensed, as the text is written for theatrical performance. The shorter lines arguably sound more naturalistic when spoken, in comparision to the longer, more literary phrases of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*. In addition, many details of the story can be visually conveyed through staging, rather than in description. An additional point of interest which results from staging is that we are simultaneously able to focus our attention on Suzanne and M. Jo

whilst still observing the mother in the background. It is significant that she should be depicted as watching over the scene, particularly at the moment where Suzanne is viewed by Mr Jo, as the sanction of her gaze indicates an unspoken approval of this relationship. This sense that the family are heavily involved in the relationship between Suzanne and M. Jo is emphasised by Suzanne's smile as she turns towards her mother and brother (EC 62). Indeed, she admits that she has committed this act solely out of love and consideration for her brother (EC 62). In this way, *L'Éden Cinéma* uses visual and narrative tools to show how mirror reflections work within intersubjective mirror relationships in a way that is potentially more accessible than a conventional narrative account.

As we have demonstrated, this episode provides many insights into the character of the protagonist and her position within a network of interpersonal mirrors. We might therefore ask why this episode, like many other, similarly meaning-rich events, is not included in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. This absence perhaps represents a basic 'failure' on the part of the intertextual mirror, by revealing that simplistic relationships between the texts are not possible. Instead, the intertextual mirror seems unreliable, as texts do not build upon their predecessors, nor consistently confirm the content of previous accounts. The intertextual mirror therefore embodies the characteristics of meaning production at intratextual level, where temporal play and narrative contradictions express the process of remembering and re-visioning. As we shall discuss in a later section, the non-linear, contradictory meaning produced by intertextual mirrors has an impact upon the reading experience, for meaning cannot be easily 'found', but must be reconstructed from Duras' controlled textual chaos.

Changing stories, changing lives, changing selves

In *Miroirs d'encre: Rhétorique de l'autoportrait,* Beaujour writes that "[l]a formule opératoire de l'autoportrait est [...]: « Je ne vous raconterai pas ce que j'ai fait, mais je vais vous dire *qui je suis* »" (Beaujour, 1980, 9). In this section, we will put forward the contrary argument that the actions of the self ('ce que j'ai fait') are in fact used by Duras as material that gives an illusion of the central self's existence ('qui je suis'). This idea that accounts of past actions can give us information about the acting selfhood is encapsulated in theories of performative identity. These highlight how identity is not an innate property, but rather the product of repeated acts or gestures, which, according to Judith Butler:

> [...] produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* [...]. (Butler, 1999, 173)

In other words, "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything" (Nietzsche, in Butler, 1999, 33).

However, in the case of Duras' autobiographical works, Nietzsche's "doer" is not only a "fiction" in terms of being a construct of performance. For the

performance is itself a fiction in the most literal sense, consisting of a story to be retold as the authorial and narrating self desires. This results in what is effectively a double fictionalisation of the speaking subject, as it is constructed through performance which is itself performatively constructed. As such, the textual self is both 'played' and 'played with': produced and yet subverted by the performative elements which create it. Re-visioning thus results in an almost a theatrical production of the central selfhood. As Emma Wilson notes, the texts become "le théâtre de son« je »", an arena where "des scénarios d'une vie imaginée" can be played out (Wilson, 2000, 7). Once again, it can be argued that the works form a stage onto which the same character can be re-projected and re-produced as the author-director wishes. In Chapter II, we discussed how the central character theatrically changes her appearance within texts using make up and costume (such as the hat and the dress); here, theatricalisation of the central selfhood takes place on a larger, intertextual level.

If we adopt the argument that history constructs the central selfhood in a performative manner, this means that the underlying 'acts' which create the illusory self (here, the past of the central selfhood) must be repeatedly asserted. However, as this involves re-writing, and therefore re-visioning, the past which the self is built upon is inevitably altered. The consequences of the author changing the historic 'facts' of the central character's existence are potentially profound. Whilst Corbin suggests that "[i]f the self is an unstable entity always undergoing metamorphoses then it follows that history is only a construct of changing points of view and thus mutable itself" (Corbin, 1996, 123), this reasoning can be easily reversed to accommodate theories of performative identity. As we have seen in the examples explored above,

history is indeed mutable in Duras' texts. If history is open to change, so the self, which is a product of this history, must also be mutable. This suggests that it is changes to the past which result in alterations to the central selfhood, and not changes in the selfhood that lead to a modification of its past. Additionally, when examining the role of (hi)story from this perspective, we might note that the resulting selfhood shares many characteristics with that produced by other types of mirror: the constructed selfhood lacks definitiveness, as it is constructed by changing reflections, and so remains open to change.

Lejeune also proposes that writing the past can produce textual identity, for "[é]crire son histoire, c'est essayer de se construire" (Lejeune, 1971, 58). Yet whilst repeated accounts of the self indeed build and potentially consolidate established textual identity and (hi)story, alteration of previously established 'facts' can also risk invalidating previous accounts of the self. Accordingly, Duras' attempts to write the self simultaneously involve both (de)stabilisation and (de)construction. The interplay between these forces means that a final, definite selfhood can never be attained, and as such, the textualised selfhood always remains unfixed. It could therefore be proposed that character production through the intertextual mirror also inherently involves a demonstration of the very non-existence of identity in the first place. For whilst the creation of intertextual mirrors allow the author to subvert her initial conception of the central figure's self-view by re-visioning this selfhood, other characters, and textual history, these changes effectively result in the denial of any possibility of the self as a coherent and innate property.

The 'failures' of the intertextual mirror also compound the difficulties faced by the reader when attempting to identify biographically truthful elements within the autobiographical story and textual selfhoods. The multiple variations upon the same basic account evoke a refusal of a singular truth of the self and the past. This refusal is then further reinforced by changes in how characters themselves perceive their experience. For example, the lover figure of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* reveals: "Avant toi je ne savais rien de la souffrance... Je croyais que je savais, mais rien je savais" (ACN 137). These changes, voiced by those who experience them at the time of the action, bring the notion of the faulty intertextual mirror down to an intratextual level. Accordingly, it is difficult for the reader, and for other characters, to access a satisfactory account of the past, and so to understand the central selfhood that is its product, as Victoria Best underlines: "Duras met en question la possibilité de connaître le soi quand il n'est pas possible de savoir sans aucun doute ce qui arrive au soi" (Best, 2000, 20).

The problems caused by unreliable intertextual mirrors can perhaps be overcome by changing our expectations of narrative truth and fiction. A more constructive perception could be drawn from the following statement:

> Since each of these texts is a slightly different version of the same story, the reader is induced to abandon the problematic distinction between fiction and autobiography and to accept what could almost be called the superreality of the story: what is being recounted comes to acquire a truth which surpasses questions of verifiable history. [...] The reader comes to see that textual reality is all that can ever be known. (Corbin, 1996, 72)

This idea of "textual reality" (Corbin, 1996, 72) can then be applied to our understanding of the selfhood as written. If reality can only ever be 'textual', the reality of the self formed by it can also only be 'textual'. This is especially true if we consider how the self is captured in language at the most basic level. As we have established, there is no essential, inherent self, either within the narrative or within the pronouns which claim to contain it: "*je* n'est autre que celui qui dit *je*: le langage connait un « sujet », non une « personne »" (Barthes, 1984, 63). We have also seen that Duras' decision to name or rename characters highlights this lack in language, and further discourages the reader from linking the empty pronouns - which belong solely to the realm of "textual reality" - to factual referents. The alteration of the 'historic' past achieves a similar effect, by meshing factual elements of the past with experiential and imagined versions. Our habitual conceptions of truth and fiction blur to form a 'textual truth', one which exists only within this "textual reality" (Corbin, 1996, 72). This perhaps explains why we cannot easily locate biographical information about the real-life correspondent of the textualised central self: the reality of the textualised central figure belongs solely to the textual sphere, and cannot be 'read' outside of it. This also means that any textual manifestation of a 'real-life' figure must take on the characteristics of a textualised selfhood, and so: "si les personnages créés par Duras manquent d'une identité vraie, fixe et intelligible, quand Duras se crée elle-même comme personnage dans ses textes, elle ne s'accorde pas plus de privilèges" (Wilson, 2000, 15).

Consequences for the reading self

In *Reading for Change,* Gill Rye explains how reading can be assimilated to effect/affect the reading self: "Representations and inscriptions in texts form part of our cultural imaginary which, in turn, is implicated in our identities, in the symbolic and social reality" (Rye, 2001, 67). Yet intertextual mirrors as we have outlined them here perhaps have more specific consequences for the reading self, as we shall now explore.

If we consider that identity is performatively created through the use of intertextual mirrors, the importance of the reading 'tu', already implicit in the formation of the protagonist's 'je' through the extra-textual mirror, becomes even greater. Not only do we, the reader, give value and meaning to the central figure's account, but we also provide an audience for the performative and 'theatrical' aspects of the central selfhood. Furthermore, as narrator and reader are always within a mirror relationship, any changes within the text that affect character portrayal must accordingly result in changes in the reader-mirror. Kristeva offers a useful analysis of the process (and *procès*) that the reading self must go through during the production of intertextual meaning:

> [A]n understanding of intertextuality [...] that points to a dynamics involving a destruction of the creative identity and reconstitution of a new plurality [...] assumes at the same time that the one who reads, the reader, participates in the same dynamics. If we are readers of intertextuality, we must be capable of the same putting-into-process of our identities, capable of identifying with the different types of texts,

> voices, and semantic, syntactic, and phonic systems at play in a given text. We also must be able to be reduced to zero [...]. (Kristeva/Waller, 1996, 190)

Defining intertextual meaning production as an active process proves the astuteness of the choice to rewrite the past, and therefore the 'self' of the text. This is because we, the reader, are forced to experience for ourselves the challenge to identity which the central character and those around her endure. It also allows us to gain some understanding of the experience of writing, for the writing self is also involved in this process of 'putting to zero':

> [L]'écriture est destruction de toute voix, de toute origine. L'écriture, c'est ce neutre, ce composite, cet oblique où fuit notre sujet, le noir-et-blanc où vient se perdre toute identité, à commencer par celle-là même du corps qui écrit. (Barthes, 1984, 61)

It is only from this point of oblivion that the writing self can be reconstructed, in a process whereby "le scripteur [...] naît en même temps que son texte" (Barthes, 1984, 64).

Although this interactive process therefore allows us to share in the creative experience, be it of the self or of the text, the intertextual mirror risks alienating the reader in other areas. The repeated fictionalisations of the (hi)story lead to the creation of a "personal past" (Murphy, 2000, 109), a version of past events which is shaped largely according to how they were experienced by the writing self. Duras' style is therefore apposite in that it allows the author to simultaneously explore past and present experiences of events. Yet at the same time, this entails a risk that the reader will be excluded

from the text. As there is no one 'truth' of either the self or of the past, the only possible focus for these accounts can be the experiential aspects of the writing and written selves' (hi)story. This could potentially result in a narrative which the reader, and perhaps later the author, cannot fully access and understand: it is a past which is perhaps too experiential and 'personal', with all layers of intra- and extra-textual meaning only available to the writing self at the moment of writing. This could have two potential consequences. The first would be our possible alienation from the text, meaning that we risk being marginalised in our role as extra-textual mirror. Second, the writing experience may also cause the writer to be somewhat dispossessed of her sense of the story. This is a feasible outcome in the case of these texts, as ostensible echoes of content and character confuse past and present, biography and autobiography. As a result, the underlying (hi)story perhaps becomes as unrecognisable to the author as to the reader: "L'écrit m'a enlevé ce qui me restait de vie, m'a dépeuplée et je ne sais plus de ce qui est écrit par moi sur ma vie et de ce que j'ai réellement vécu ce qui est vrai" (Duras, in Adler, 1998, 518). This inability to easily identify a coherent narrative of either lived or written (hi)story is perhaps exacerbated by the reader's necessary interaction in (re)constructing textual and intertextual meaning: ownership of the story is shared between writing and reading selves.

We have therefore proposed that re-writing leads to the production of intertextual mirrors. These mirrors generate meaning when their relationship to one another is interpreted by the reading self. We would expect that re-writing would re-assert the 'facts' of the autobiographical (hi)story, and so allow the written past to be used to performatively construct the central selfhood. However, as re-writing inevitably involves re-visioning, previously

established 'facts' are often contradicted or absent from texts. This results in non-identical re-performances of both past and self. As a consequence, a plurality of selves and (hi)stories is produced. This multiplicity shows that the (hi)story cannot exist as plain 'fact', for it is experienced both at the moment of the action, and of the moment of re-visioning. It also reveals that the 'self' is a non-inherent property, for the stability of the facts on which it is founded is equally illusory. Indeed, if these 'facts' change, the selfhood resulting from them changes also. It was also suggested that the elusiveness of a definitive central selfhood and an accompanying story may alienate both reader and author, as our ability to grasp the underlying 'story' is diminished. We might add to this point that the author's authority is potentially threatened by the increased involvement of the reader necessary for the production of meaning by intertextual mirrors. However, the author's presence is always evident, as the plurality of the central selfhood produced by intertextual mirrors strongly echoes the idea of the creative subjectivity as a "kaleidoscope" or "polyphony" (Kristeva/Waller, 1996, 190). Duras' written counterpart thus echoes her writing self, as both are shown to be multiple and changing. In conclusion, both (hi)story and self are shown to be textual fictions, constructed rather than pre-existent, rather as Lejeune notes: "l'autobiographie est invention de ce qui n'est pas." (Lejeune, 1980, 175).

In Conclusion

In summary, the existence of four types of mirrors was proposed: intersubjective, static, extra-textual, and intertextual. When we consider the construction of the central self via intersubjective, static, and extra-textual mirrors, the process of compositely forming the illusion of a central selfhood seems relatively straightforward. Interactions with each of these mirrors offer an 'other' to the central figure's 'self', forming reflections which provide the illusion of a coherent selfhood. Other characters, or indeed the reader, through our interpretation of the text, may subvert or manipulate the intended self-image. We, as reader, enjoy a privileged role in that our extra-textual situation allows us to gather all of these reflections. This in turn establishes a relatively coherent and stable picture of the central character's selfhood. However, when we move beyond the consideration of these mirrors, which largely operate on an intra-textual level, the nature of character formation is greatly altered. Indeed, instead of consolidating the wavering image of the central self formed by the three other types of mirror, it seems that intertextual mirrors work to undermine it.

This destabilization can be accounted for by the way that intertextual mirrors construct character. Rather than offering a straightforward reflection of the central self, intertextual mirrors work by highlighting the central self's (hi)story. As we have discussed, this (hi)story is used in a performative manner to create an illusion of a coherent central selfhood. Past is not considered to be a product of the self: the self is considered to be a product of its past. At first glance, we might consider that a re-assertion of the past through writing would confirm any previously established sense of self, as

the writing self would repeatedly act as 'other' to her textualised counterpart. However, as re-writing inevitably involves re-visioning, the basic 'facts' which underlie the central self are inherently inconsistent. As Emma Wilson observes, the consequence is that "[r]epetition and replication work as much to corrode as to corroborate the individual's performance of identity" (Wilson, 1996, 190). Furthermore, the increased reader involvement necessary to the establishment of intertextual mirrors may lead to further distortion of textual 'facts'. After all, we cannot ensure a consistent or predictable reading: a reader is, after all "a person in history, a person with a history" (Miller, in Rye, 2001, 45). Our intensified involvement may therefore also undermine the constructive work of other mirrors, including the reflections established by our own readings of individual texts.

The central selfhood is therefore simultaneously established and dis-established by the antagonistic forces of the intertextual and intratextual mirrors. As such, the self seems to vacillate between existence and non-existence. However, the inability of mirror reflections to establish a coherent selfhood can perhaps also be attributed to other factors. As Duras explains, "C'est dans la reprise des temps par l'imaginaire que le souffle est rendu à la vie" (Duras, in Armel, 1990, 131). It is therefore perhaps inevitable that the central self and its (hi)story can never truly be written into textual existence: in order to be textually re-lived, they must first be resurrected through the creative mind. The biographical 'facts' of the self and its past, or an untainted encapsulation of how a past moment was experienced, cannot possibly be textually expressed. Instead, the self and its past can only exist as re-visioned, re-experienced, and thus pluralized. Re-writing therefore results in a number of tentative selves and provisional pasts, none of which claim textual or extra-

textual authority. Yet it is possibly this tentativeness that tempts us to reconstruct the central self. Just as the imagined photograph of *L'Amant* is made intriguing and meaningful by its very non-existence, so the absent self and the (hi)story which accompanies it awakens the reader's curiosity. However, this absence can only be meaningful within the text, and so the central self and her story cannot be extricated from the textual realm.

It could be suggested the antagonistic effects of mirrors, and the ensuing inability to envision a coherent central self, result from Duras' experience of writing. Firstly, there appears to be no clear, pre-formed picture of the autobiographical story, or sometimes of its existence: "je ne me souviens plus" (LA 38). Secondly, the author seems to have little awareness of what will emerge in the course of writing, for "[l]'écriture, c'est l'inconnu. Avant d'écrire on ne sait rien de ce qu'on va écrire" (ECR 52). Finally, her experience of the actual writing process almost suggests an accidental arrangement of textual content, style, and temporality: "Du style, je m'en occupe pas. [...] Je dis les choses comme elles m'arrivent sur moi [...], comme elles m'attaquent si vous voulez, comme elles m'aveuglent" (Duras/Pivot, 1984). Given this seemingly chaotic experience, it is perhaps unsurprising that the central self conveys a lack of (conventionally defined) coherency, and that the texts stylistically embody a lack of linearity and consequentiality.

It seems, then, as Philippe Lejeune observes: "Du point de vue de la psychanalyse, l'autobiographie apparaît donc plutôt comme une tentative de construction de la personnalité que comme une tentative de connaissance" (Lejeune, 1971, 65). Although the mirror trope successfully expresses this process of self-construction, we have also discovered that it cannot recover

the central figure of Duras' texts. The reflections offered by intersubjective, static and extra-textual mirrors are in constant conflict with the incoherent (inter)textual reflections. As a result, the self oscillates in and out of existence, and unable to be fully constructed (or indeed, fully destroyed). Furthermore, as Duras' strategy of re-visioning creates a transforming and transformable textual self, and a mutable past, these works refuse to corroborate any possible coherency that might be afforded by mirror reflections. Instead, the self is constantly revealed in its underlying form: fragmented, temporary, and mutable. The reader can only conclude, ironically, that "une identité ferme demeure une fiction" (Kristeva, 1987, 263); and so we and the central self cannot but remain "devant l'inconnu total l'un de l'autre" (ACN 218).

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